

Indigenous Peoples Day – engaging the issues through Sherman Alexie’s “The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian.” Discussion Guide

The following guide is designed to encourage groups to consider important themes in Alexie’s book that connect with anti-racism work. Reading and discussing this or other books that tell indigenous peoples’ stories and perspectives can help raise consciousness about how racism and oppression is reproduced in our society’s institutions and practices and helps promote racial justice and healing.

Racial Oppression and Internalized Racism

“...books can be both mirrors and windows—mirrors in which readers can see themselves on the pages of literature and thereby know their existence in the world is valid and true, and windows into worlds they might never have imagined” (Jacqueline Woodson, from the Forward to the 10th Anniversary Edition of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*)

For White readers, this book offers a window on the experiences of native peoples and other people of color in U.S. society. How does seeing the world through the voice of Junior illuminate the operations of systemic racism? What insights does it give readers into the various ways racial oppression impacts its victims? How do racist views and actions affect those engaging in racial oppression?

For people of color reading this book—whether or not one is indigenous—this book conveys some of the common experiences those suffering racialized oppression endure. What ideas or lessons emerge from the perspective Alexie’s book offers?

Can greater understanding of the experience of racial oppression help our society change some of the structures that allow it to continue? Do discussion group members have ideas of actions we can take in our community to reduce racist actions and to help reverse the damage of long-standing patterns of discrimination against indigenous peoples and other people of color? After reading this book, how do group members feel about the demands being made by some African Americans and indigenous peoples for reparations for slavery, genocide, and land theft? For a perspective on reparations, see Ta-Nahisi Coates’s [“The Case for Reparations”](#). Reparations for African Americans and for Indigenous People have been discussed in an increasing number of international and national courts, and there is a growing body of law supporting such claims. This special issue of [Cultural Survival examines a number of cases regarding reparations for indigenous peoples.](#)

Education System

Early in the story, Junior throws an outdated textbook at his teacher and is suspended. The plot turns when the teacher, Mr. P, comes to Junior's home and apologizes to him. On page 35, Mr. P says:

No matter how much I don't want to, I have to forgive you. It's the only things that keeps me from smacking you with an ugly stick. When I first started teaching here, that's what we did to the rowdy ones, you know? We beat them. That's how we were taught to teach you. We were supposed to kill the Indian to save the child.

Junior is shocked. "You killed Indians?"

Mr. P replies: No, no, it's just a saying. I didn't literally kill Indians. We were supposed to make you give up being Indian. Your songs and stories and language and dancing. Everything. We weren't trying to kill Indian people. We were trying to kill Indian culture.

The story of native education policies and boarding schools is not widely known. Consider some of these resources to learn more.

- <https://www.nativetimes.com/archives/46-life/commentary/14059-truth-and-reconciliationkill-the-indian-and-save-the-man>
- <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4929/>
- <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16516865>

How do you think this history has shaped life on reservations and the life-chances of native people?

Life on the Rez

Read the brief chapter called "Remembering" (pp 215-218). Junior states (p. 216) that "Reservations were meant to be prisons, you know? Indians were supposed to move onto reservations and die. We were supposed to disappear" (216).

Reservations were created as the culmination of a long policy designed to "close the frontier" and "Americanize" the Indians. Few people are familiar with the story of American Indian reservations in the West.

Here are a few resources about reservations:

- <http://www.ushistory.org/us/40.asp>
- <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/10/life-pine-ridge-native-american-reservation-161031113119935.html>

How does this history shape your reading of the book? How does it shape your thinking about the situation of indigenous people in our country today?

Do you find anything odd about the [introductory article](#) when compared with the [story that follows](#)? (The first article notes that “Both sides committed unspeakable atrocities,” but the subsequent history tells a rather different story; note that the Indians only fought with US Troops, and only in response to provocations such as attacks or land grabs. Compare this with President Trump’s recent comments on the racial violence initiated by neo-Nazi’s and “alt-right” agitators in Charlottesville, VA.)

Negative stereotypes?

- When Alexie’s book first appeared, some critics complained that it perpetuated negative stereotypes of Native Americans. But there is a tension between perpetuating “stereotypes” and commenting on grim social realities.

Read this brief article on key issues facing native peoples today:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/13-native-americanissues_us_55b7d801e4b0074ba5a6869c

How does reading this article help you think differently about recent events at Standing Rock? (See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dakota_Access_Pipeline_protests)

How do the struggles of Native Americans connect with those of other marginalized and oppressed people in the United States?

Happy Columbus Day?

Moves to re-designate Columbus Day as Indigenous People’s Day are sometimes condemned by critics as “political correctness.”

After reading this book and considering the resources collected here, what do you have to say about why Indigenous Peoples might find the idea of celebrating the European colonization of the Americas problematic?