

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian Reading Guide

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 show his understanding of the ways that racism has deeply impacted his and his family’s lives (for example, “Who my parents would have been if somebody had paid attention to their dreams” and “white/Indian”)?
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 Ian 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?

Adapted from www.whatcomreads.org