Dare to Be Different:

Celebrating Difference and Redefining Disability in Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

Setting the Context

Alan Brown

I first met Siobhan McIntyre, a senior English major at Wake Forest University, during the fall of 2015 on the first day of EDU 231: Adolescent Literature. EDU 231 is a survey of literature course that centers on the lives of adolescents and young adults with specific attention given to the reading and interpretation of classic and contemporary literature across genres. The course was advertised thematically with an emphasis on exploring adolescent and young adult literature and the impact of censorship in schools and society. The primary theoretical text used in the course was Petrone, Sarigianides, and Lewis's (2015) *The Youth Lens: Analyzing Adolescence/ts in Literary Texts*, which encourages students to examine "how ideas about adolescence and youth get formed, circulated, critiqued, and revised" (p. 506) in texts written about adolescents and young adults.

Course assignments for EDU 231 included two activities adapted from Lent and Pipkin (2013): 1) dialogue with a censor, in which students address and respond to rationales commonly provided for censorship, and 2) censorship simulations, including a mock school board meeting and a mock parent–teacher conference. Other course assignments included a class project in which students produced an exhibit in the university's library for banned books week, a small-scale literature review of research and practitioner journal articles on the censorship of adolescent and young adult literature, and a final project that invited students to select from among four prompts, one of which was *The ALAN Review*'s call for manuscripts about exploration of difference.

Throughout the semester, I was impressed with Siobhan's interpretations of and insights into the novels we read in class (see sidebar, p. 80 for a sample of the assigned texts). When given the options for the final project, she enthusiastically selected *The ALAN Review*'s call for manuscripts as her prompt. In her paper, she focused her attention on Junior, the protagonist from Alexie's (2007) *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian,* and the language he used to explore his understandings about his disability and its effects on his life. It was only later that I learned how Siobhan's own personal experiences impacted her reading of the text. Her story reminded me of one of my favorite paragraphs from Brown and Mitchell (2014) about the purpose and utility of young adult literature:

> Young adult literature is written *about* teenagers, *for* teenagers, and within contexts that mirror the world of teenagers [emphasis in original]. In these texts, they are not asked to identify with Dostoevsky's 19th-century Russian protagonist who is contemplating the murder of a pawnbroker or Hawthorne's adulteress who is shunned by her Puritan community. Instead, they see their lives reflected in the characters, settings, plots, conflicts, and themes, and they find issues nested in familiar contexts that are pertinent to their daily lives: social pressures, bullying, eating disorders, familial strife, and identity crises. (p. 6)

It was then I realized that the crucial context of disability was missing from the list, and after further

Sample of the Assigned Texts in EDU 231

Adolescent Literature Thematic Focus: Censored Classic and Contemporary Young Adult Novels

The Contender by Robert Lipsyte (1967)

The Chocolate War by Robert Cormier (1974)

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry by Mildred D. Taylor (1976)

Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)

The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky (1999)

Whale Talk by Chris Crutcher (2001)

Feed by M.T. Anderson (2002)

Looking for Alaska by John Green (2005)

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie (2007)

Mexican WhiteBoy by Matt de la Peña (2008)

inquiry (see the upcoming section entitled "Surveying the Literature"), I began to recognize a void within scholarship pertaining to characters with disabilities—the stories of real students who read and relate to these fictional characters.

With this gap in mind, I asked Siobhan if she would be willing to share her story alongside her examination of Junior's experience in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. The end result is the forthcoming article that we hope will allow students and teachers alike to witness firsthand the importance of sharing stories as a central measure of rethinking "normal" and embracing differences.

Beating the Odds

Siobhan McIntyre

When I first read *The ALAN Review*'s call for manuscripts on the topic of rethinking "normal" and embracing differences, I felt particularly compelled to write an essay on the topic. For me, the language surrounding difference hit very close to home. I was born three months premature. Like Junior in Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, I, too, was supposed to "croak" (doctors told my mother I had a 50 percent chance of survival), but somehow, I beat the odds, and my only "differences" are a mild case of cerebral palsy and no peripheral vision. I was almost completely blind, but I had laser eye surgery shortly after I was born. I have been wearing glasses since the age of two. Unlike most people, I have never been able to run, jump, and climb, and I walk with a slight limp. Like Junior, I was bullied, especially in elementary and middle school. Kids picked on me for the way I walked and teased me about the thickness of my glasses. My left eye would wander, so people often asked sarcastically whether or not I was looking at them. As a child, this question frustrated me because I felt people regularly underestimated my abilities based solely on how they viewed my perceived disabilities. And it was not only my classmates; teachers sometimes marginalized me, as well.

When I was in first grade, my teacher called my mother to come to the school for a mandatory parent–teacher conference. The teacher, my mother, and the principal sat down in the administrative office to evaluate my performance. My mom told the teacher at the beginning of the school year that I had a visual impairment and needed to sit close to the blackboard. The teacher was convinced that I needed to be moved to the special education class because I "acted different," "squinted my eyes," and "read funny." And then she used the word—a word that, even now, makes me cringe whenever I hear it, a word weighted with stigma, negativity, and shame. She asked my mother if I was retarded.

My mother, who was at this point extremely angry, carefully informed the teacher that no, I did not have an intellectual disability. As a matter of fact, I had taken an IQ test and scored 123 when I was four years old—seven points away from being able to join Mensa, a society for individuals whose IQ ranks in the top two percent of the population. At that same age, I had the vocabulary of a third grader. My mother saw my potential and nurtured it; she was determined not to let me be disadvantaged based on my differences. She worked together with the principal and my (very reluctant) teacher to draft a 504 plan to support my learning by providing me with extended time on tests and quizzes and moving my seat directly in front of overheads and blackboards. She fought for me and

taught me how to stand up for myself, both inside and outside of the classroom, and I am eternally grateful for her persistence.

I made straight A's from kindergarten to 12th grade, and many of the kids who bullied me are now my friends because they (and I) realized that a person should not judge a book by its cover. I think that is why Junior resonated with me so much. He was born with differences, and he acknowledges them. They are a part of who he is, but they do not define him. I believe that the definition of disability itself may connote a common misconception surrounding disabilities: you may *have* a disability, but the disability does not *have* you. Junior is bullied relentlessly, but he takes it all in stride, relating his experiences to readers in a way that allows him to laugh at his own pain. It is all about perspective, and Junior's perspective is very bright. He is witty, funny, expressive, and completely out-of-the-box. He embraces what makes him different, which is something I strive to do every day. I think everyone, especially adolescent and young adult readers, can learn a lot from taking a page out of Junior's—and Alexie's—book.

Surveying the Literature

Alan Brown

Inspired by Siobhan's own personal history with cerebral palsy and visual impairment, I conducted an investigation of the concepts of normalcy and disability in young adult literature and specifically Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian.* Before Siobhan examines Junior's coming-of-age story, I would like to share what I learned. It is first important to note that the idea of sharing stories is not a new one, but it is more often connected with adolescent and young adult literature through engagement with multicultural literature (Baer & Glasgow, 2010; Brooks, Browne, & Hampton, 2008; Lewis, 2014; Overall, 2014; and Stewart, 2015) and less often in scholarly writings related to texts that connect students' and characters' experiences with disability. For this reason, I provide an overview of the literature about disability before moving specifically to scholarship citing Alexie's story.

In a study of recent trends in young adult literature, Koss and Teale (2009) estimated that a quarter of the most popular young adult books from 1999 to 2005 included one or more characters with disabilities, which they suggest is much higher than anticipated. But what is characterized as a disability is an important question. Curwood (2013) broke down disabilities present in children's and young adult literature into categories of books that examine disability in general, learning disabilities, mental disabilities, developmental disabilities, dementia, visual impairments, and communication disorders. The benefit of novels that feature characters with disabilities is that many students can relate to them as they "learn to question society's apparent assumptions about disability, which they [may] have unconsciously applied to themselves" (Curwood, 2013, p. 85). More important, seeing a range of diverse characters in the books we read in English classes and/or find in the school library, including books featuring protagonists of color and protagonists with disabilities, allows students to recognize those characters not as adolescents set apart from their peers, but as equal members of their various communities.

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Unfortunately, not all young adult novels that include characters with disabilities are viewed as realistic (e.g., books centered on the topic of visual impairment; see Carroll & Rosenblum, 2000). Furthermore, not all of these books portray characters with disabilities in an inclusive environment, and while that aspect may feel realistic, it can also create challenges for classroom teachers. Dunn (2015) cautions that while combining "high-quality disability-themed fiction" with responsible discussions and critical thinking can help students break down the "us/them dichotomy," discussions that lack "well-placed critical questions" can, in turn, serve to exacerbate existing stereotypes (p. 2). Yet the inclusion of adolescent and young adult literature featuring characters with disabilities may also provide many learning opportunities for teachers and students alike. As Curwood (2013) has suggested, inclusion literature can provide a chance for

> students with disabilities [to] see their experiences represented, [so] all students can develop a richer understanding of what constitutes a disability and how it is often positioned in relation to the able-bodied norm. The integration of critical analysis and disability counternarratives in the classroom can also offer students a space to consider how their own lives are shaped by normalcy narratives. (p. 26)

As I think back on Siobhan's story about being teased and bullied, I am reminded, too, that characters with learning disabilities in adolescent and young adult literature are also commonly teased or bullied (Prater, 2003), and the same can likely be said of characters with physical disabilities. In describing Arnold Spirit, Jr. (a.k.a. Junior) from Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Haertling Thein and Sulzer (2015) point to a reality faced by countless students in schools across the country when it comes to bullying: "[Arnold] suggests that while his differences and disabilities were seen as 'cute' and acceptable in childhood, that acceptability ended in adolescence. Instead, 'difference' in adolescence spurs pack mentality, attacks on weakness, and age-marked bullying tactics" (p. 51).

Siobhan and I find Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* to be a worthwhile teaching tool—not only in the way the text describes Junior, a fictional character, but also in how Junior's life experience mirrors the childhood experience of author Sherman Alexie.

Ripley Crandall (2009) encourages teachers to challenge the status quo of the common educational experiences faced by many students (e.g., bullying) by teaching texts through a disability lens. Although his focus is on *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, he acknowledges that many classic texts may also be worthy of disability study and argues that "literature provides a window into how cultures create power dynamics and roles for its people—roles deserving challenging questions and rethinking" (Ripley Crandall, 2009, p. 76). Andrews (1998) adds that literature containing characters with disabilities—or what she refers to as inclusion literature—"can become a powerful tool for helping students without disabilities develop an awareness of and tolerance for those with disabilities" (n.p.).

Siobhan and I find Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* to be a worthwhile teaching tool—not only in the way the text describes Junior, a fictional character, but also in how Junior's life experience mirrors the childhood experience of author Sherman Alexie. As a teacher of young adult literature, I believe students can relate to Junior's character for myriad reasons, including his outsider status at Reardan School, the loss of close family members, his romantic overtures with Penelope, and his struggle to gain confidence as a basketball player. And yet, perhaps the most teachable moment comes in the very first line of the book as Junior announces, "I was born with water on the brain" (Alexie, 2007, p. 1). Ripley Crandall (2009) best sums up what this statement means in describing Junior's experience with hydrocephalus:

> Hydrocephalus, the condition Arnold had as a newborn, occurs when brain fluid is not reabsorbed into the circulatory system. In "normal" children, cerebrospinal fluid provides a layer of protection where the brain and spinal chord float, but in children born with hydrocephalus, the extra fluid causes an expansion of the head. This fluid pressure forces the brain against the bones of the skull and, in return, can destroy brain tissue. Eye coordination, motor skills, muscles, memory, social behavior, learning, judgment, and personality can be affected, depending on the location of the swelling fluid. (p. 72)

As Cline (2000/2001) explains, author Sherman Alexie was also born with hydrocephalus and underwent brain surgery at six months old. Doctors afforded him a limited chance of survival and noted that if he did survive, he would likely end up with a sustained mental impairment. "Yet," says Cline (2000/2001), "Alexie did survive, with his mental faculties not only intact, but also quite advanced. He learned to read by age two, and was polishing off tomes like *The Grapes of Wrath* by kindergarten (though he only understood the last chapter)" (pp. 197–198). To lend further credibility to Junior's story, Alexie also knew what it was like to be bullied due to physical abnormalities, as he was "frequently mocked and ostracized by the other children, some of whom called him 'The Globe' because of his large head" (Grassian, 2005, p. 2). And like Junior, as well as Wake Forest University senior Siobhan McIntyre, "Alexie found refuge in books and in school . . . [and] he quickly learned the value of

humor both as a means of deflecting the abuse from other children and also as a means of personal empowerment" (Grassian, 2005, p. 2).

Making Visible the Invisible

Siobhan McIntyre

In school, we are taught that everyone is different in his or her own unique way and that we should treat everyone with respect. This statement may sound cliché, but it is not easily accomplished in a classroom setting, especially when working with students with disabilities. Oftentimes, teenagers see something on the outside of a person that they do not like or that they are surprised by, and they automatically assume that they will not like what is on the inside either. This is where another cliché comes in handy: do not judge a book by its cover. This saying especially rings true in Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*.

Alexie's protagonist, Arnold Spirit, Jr., is the poster boy for what it means to be different. He is a Spokane Indian who lives on a reservation ("rez" for short) and was born with excess cerebral spinal fluid on his skull, which he calls "brain grease" (Alexie, 2007, p. 1). In his own words, his brain grease is a result of the brain damage he suffered when "The doctors cut open my little skull and sucked out all that extra water with some tiny vacuum. . . . I ended up having forty-two teeth . . . . Ten more than usual. Ten teeth past human" (p. 2). He casually adds that he is nearsighted in one eye and farsighted in the other, joking that "My eyes are, like, enemies, you know, like they used to be married to each other but now hate each other's guts," and since the age of three, he has been wearing "ugly, thick, black, plastic" glasses that he says make him look like an "Indian grandpa" (p. 3). Junior calls attention to his flaws and shortcomings early in the text. Perhaps this is to pick on himself so that readers cannot do so themselves, even if those same readers cannot see him: "And, oh, I was skinny. I'd turn sideways and *disappear*. But my hands and feet were huge . . . . With my big feet and pencil body, I look like a capital *L* walking down the road" (p. 3).

At first, readers may wonder why Junior is ridiculing himself. Soon, however, they might realize that this mockery is his self-defense mechanism. He recalls, "My head was so big that little Indian skulls orbited around 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 finger down on my skull, and say 'I want to go there'" (Alexie, 2007, p. 4). The language Alexie uses in these lines and elsewhere is hilarious at first glance, but if we look closer, it is clear that Junior's differences hurt him emotionally, even though he never explicitly says so. Junior uses humor to cope with life in general because not only does he have physical disabilities, he also has a troubling family history of alcoholism and is constantly surrounded by death. Junior often laughs to keep from crying, and his glass-half-full approach to life proves that laughter truly is the best medicine.

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Another aspect that sets Junior apart from the crowd is his ability to draw. From the beginning, it is clear that drawing is Junior's true passion. He says,

> I draw all the time. . . . I draw because words are too unpredictable. I draw because words are too limited. If you speak and write in English, or Spanish, or Chinese, or any other language, then only a certain percentage of human beings will get your meaning. But when you draw a picture, everybody can understand it. . . . So I draw because . . . I want the world to pay attention to me. I feel important with a pen in my hand . . . . the world is a series of broken dams and floods, and my cartoons are tiny little lifeboats. (p. 5)

Junior speaks with a stutter and a lisp, which makes him an even greater target for bullies, and although Alexie does not write the way Junior speaks, the pictures in the book say just as much as his words; pictures can speak a language all their own, depicting emotions that words would not be able to convey. Through images, we see the dynamic between Junior and his best friend, Rowdy, who is mean to him but who seems to be the only one to truly understand him. We also get a glimpse of how his family looks and acts as well as how he reacts to the deaths of his

grandmother, sister, and his father's friend, Eugene. Junior transfers to Reardan after a heart-to-heart talk with his math teacher, Mr. P, at which time he decides to leave the reservation in hopes of getting a better education.

He is apprehensive because Reardan is "a hick town . . . filled with farmers and rednecks and racist cops who stop every Indian that drives through" (Alexie, 2007, p. 46). And he is more than a little intimidated when he arrives at Reardan and realizes that his physical disabilities will not be the only thing that sets him apart from the other students—the only other Indian at the school is the mascot. "Those kids weren't just white, they were translucent. . . . They stared at me like I was Bigfoot or a UFO" (p. 56). It certainly does not help that Junior is both Indian *and* poor. One of the most important drawings in the book shows a split image of a White boy with a "bright future" wearing a Ralph Lauren shirt, Timex wrist watch, Tommy Hilfiger khakis, and the latest Air Jordan shoes, standing next to Junior, an Indian with a "vanishing past" and dressed in a Kmart t-shirt, Sears blue jeans, and canvas tennis shoes while toting his books around in a Glad garbage bag (p. 57). This image encapsulates the essence of the book's title, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, as Junior tries to navigate two life-worlds while simultaneously developing his own identity.

Junior feels that he embraces his Indian identity only part of the time because he goes to an all-White school. He thinks he must abandon his Indian identity in exchange for a better life. He confides in us, the readers, and offers an inside look at the good, the bad, and the ugly of his life, his "absolutely true diary." The feelings that he shares, as well as the pictures he draws, clearly tell us that he does not want to abandon his Indian identity; he only wants a better version of it. When people look at Junior, he does not want them to see the kid with water on the brain who speaks differently and disappears when he turns sideways. He wants us to see him as a boy who is proudly Indian, one who is searching for hope when everything around him seems hopeless.

Junior wants us to read this book all the way through without skipping over any of the important parts, because his entire story is important. He gives us words, but the pictures he shares are just as important, if not more so; the images provide details that our imaginations may miss through textual reading. In a sense, the entire novel is Junior's canvas because his drawings paint a picture of the world as he wants us to see it. Words tell us what was said, but pictures tell us what was *felt*. These pictures zero in on the experiences that significantly impact Junior's life. They refuse to sugarcoat or gloss over the rough patches of Junior's adolescence. And these images do not apologize for being real and true to Junior. This is the lesson the novel teaches young adult readers: in order to completely understand someone's truth, we must first attempt to see the world as he or she sees it, all parts of it, especially the parts that we, as readers, may not feel as comfortable viewing. When we force ourselves to see the bigger picture, it is easier to empathize with others' stories while simultaneously celebrating our own uniqueness. The ultimate goal of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is for its readers to learn how to walk a mile in someone else's shoes and to embrace the Arnold Spirit, Jr. that lies somewhere inside all of us.

Embracing Differences

Siobhan McIntyre and Alan Brown

The saying that reminds us not to judge a book by its cover may certainly be applied to the way *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* has been received in the literary world. As we circle back to the context of EDU 231 with its focus on censorship in schools and society, we find that this novel is censored or challenged in various settings, most likely due to its use of profanity and the ways in which it lays bare the harsh realities of alcoholism, bulimia, and death. Or perhaps censors struggle with the fact that Alexie overtly contrasts the plight of the poor Indian to the privileged, White American. It is a bold move, which is why this text is a vitally important part of the literary canon. The entire novel is about accepting differences and not pre-judging others. As Tara Anderson reminds us, Alexie's award-winning novel has the potential to "serve as a gateway for rich conversations about issues of diversity, poverty, pain, and racism in students' lives and in the United States" (see Brown, Mitchell, & Youngblood, 2014, p. 33).

We would like to add conversations about disability to that list. Junior is judged so harshly by society based on his disabilities that his wide range of abilities is often overlooked—and those abilities are exactly what should be celebrated. In fact, Junior stands as a

model to teach all students about the unyielding possibilities of overcoming even the most disproportionate odds as well as judging an entire book not only by its text, but also by its context—from the cover to the words to the images to the captions to the titles.

It is our hope that Alexie's novel will help change the way readers think about differences and disabilities and will encourage them to look beneath the surface. Teachers can help students understand that books, like people, are worth much more than face value. If we challenge ourselves to dig deeper, to turn the page and, at a minimum, read a person's table of contents, we can learn to consider the individual by the contents of their character and not just their appearance alone. If a picture is worth a thousand words, we must help students learn to view that picture by reading between the lines of the story. When they do, we may be pleasantly surprised to find students re-thinking "normal" and embracing the differences that so often divide them.

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