

Rogue Librarians, Episode 14

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian (Part 2: Close Reading)

Welcome to the 14th episode of Rogue Librarians, a podcast in which three librarians discuss banned books. We are your hosts, Marian, Dorothy, Alanna, and we are the Rogue Librarians. We would love for you to participate in our discussion. Please visit theroguelibrarians.com or follow us on Instagram or Facebook @roguelibrarianspod or on Twitter @RLibrarians.

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Today, we are continuing our discussion of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, which was written by Sherman Alexie and illustrated by Ellen Forney. It was the sixth most challenged book in 2021 and the most frequently banned and challenged book from 2010 to 2019. First published in 2007, the semi-autobiographical novel won the National Book Award for Young People's Literature, appeared on several lists for best books for young adults, and won the Odyssey Award for best audiobook, which was read by Alexie. The main reasons this book has been banned are for profanity, sexual references, use of a derogatory term, alcoholism, racism, gambling, bullying, violence, unsuited for age group, and allegations of sexual misconduct by the author. As we mentioned last time, Sherman Alexie was accused of sexual harassment by several women in 2018. Please listen to our previous episode to hear our discussion of that and other pros and cons.

All right. So to re-summarize for you guys, uh this book is about Junior uh also known as Arnold Spirit and he is a uh Spokane Indian. Uh And that's the term that uh that he uses in the book. And uh it is about his decision to leave the reservation to go to a school. Uh That is better. He's very smart. His teacher recommends that he get out of the reservation in order to um you know, be educated and uh fine display in the world and he does and it's uh his story of navigating uh belonging and identity and uh how to be uh you know, in two places at one time, a part time Indian.

Thank you. So, a little disclaimer. Um as we mentioned last time, uh through research, we've discovered that different native peoples have preferences, have different preferences as to how they would like to be addressed. Um Sherman Alexie is um from the Spokane uh tribe and grew up on the Spokane or Spokane Indian reservation in the book. He uses the term Indian. And so, um as we are quoting the book, we will try to use that term as well. Um At other times, you will probably hear us using Native American and please remember that um we, our attempt is to not offend. So um if you have any comments or questions about our choice of words, um please please comment on our web page and let us know we would love to discuss it further with you.

Um So we'll go ahead and go right into our first segment. Um And this is where we uh talk about the characters that are in the book. This is the segment characterization and the first uh obvious character is Junior slash Arnold. He is both of these people. Um Arnold is his given name among many others. Um He has a very long name and uh his whole family calls him Junior. Everyone on the reservation calls him Junior. Um And I just think that's very fitting because it goes right along with the title that he is a part time Indian. And therefore he has, you know, clearly, even with his name, these two completely separate identities at the white school. He's Arnold and on the rez he's Junior.

And just love to add uh that Junior is so perfect. Uh I'm assuming it's, it is a common nickname, you know, a shortening uh, on the, yeah, apparently a lot of people are called Junior. Yeah. But literally we're talking about inherited trauma. And so to be Junior to be, I am more Native American, another of the people that are stuck on this reservation, that is my identity is, uh, it works really well.

Actually, that's an excellent point. Yeah.

Yeah. Arnold is a really interesting character. Um, he a, as both of you said, he has, um, a funny sense of humor and it seems like he has had to become tough in a way because of how much he's been bullied since he was a little kid. Um, it mentions that he was born with some disabilities because, um, as he calls it, he had water on the brain. Um, and, uh, they did surgery when he was six months old and, um, he was supposed to suffer serious brain damage. But one of the things about Junior is that he overcomes so many obstacles, including the fact that other kids on the reservation beat him up regularly, um, that, uh, adults are critical of him, uh, regularly. And, um, it's, it gets even worse when he decides to leave the reservation and they

feel like, well to go to school and they feel like he's betrayed them. And so he is just such a, a tough person who is still yearning for human connection and missing his best friend who rejects him and trying to make new friends and fit in, in this new society. So, uh, I, I really admired so many things about him even though I, I think he's a very different person from who I am.

Yeah, I, I found him, I found it very interesting that he has such a self deprecating, look at him, you know, look at himself. He, he jokes about the fact that he has an unusually large head, which that's whether it is or not, that's his perception of himself because of the water on the brain and everyone bullies him about it. And the irony is that as a result of having water on the brain, it, I guess it's particularly dangerous if he has any kind of head trauma. And yet everyone on the reservation is, you know, beating him up on a regular basis. Um, so clearly he's suffered more head trauma, whether it's a direct or indirect. And I don't know, that's just an interesting little side thing that made me pause and think.

Other defining characteristics of Arnold would include his intelligence and he's described as maybe the smartest kid on the rez, except his older sister Mary, and his love of basketball. That's right. He loves basketball, turns out he's good at it. Uh, and he's very loyal, uh, despite his choice to move to go off the rez, uh, I think his character is very loyal, particularly to Rowdy. He keeps trying to stay in touch with Rowdy and become his friend again, even though Rowdy continually rejects him until a certain point which we can talk, maybe not talk about, we can spoil everything we can't spoil things. Well, we try not to spoil the very end. How about that? I guess? Um, but the very end is important.

Um, I was just going to say, why don't we move on to Junior's family because that also, um, defines him even more clearly. Um, he has a very interesting relationship with his mom and his dad. Um his sister, Mary, and his grandmother who is known as Grandmother Spirit. His mom and dad are both heavy drinkers. I think his mom used to be but is no longer I was just gonna say less so for his mom but, but dad continues to be a heavy drinker, um an alcoholic. Um And then of course, Mary, his older sister who was previously the smartest person on the rez who um has moved to the basement at least at the beginning part of the story and pretty much lives in isolation in the basement. She had wanted to be an author and um and she's living in the basement and, and then of course, there's Grandmother Spirit who is um Junior's, you know, very close connection and he values her so much and her wisdom and he goes to her with his concerns about, you know, what do I do and, and things of that nature. So he's got a very very

close knit relationship with her. I think, what do we think about the fact that Mary is almost exclusively, sort of not present when we are learning about her. We get the letters that she writes when after she leaves. Right. We get a lot of discussion of what she was, what she is like and was like, we get the teacher telling us about writing, wanting to write romance novels, but she's kind of absent as a character.

You know, that, that's a great point, Dorothy. And I actually felt that way about all of his family members. I, I felt like I didn't get to know any of them as well as maybe we could, um, especially his mom because we find out his mom is really intelligent and really great at memorizing things she reads and, um, he imagines these other lives for his parents and his sister, you know, if maybe they hadn't been born on the reservation and then had, had more money, think of these other things they could have achieved. Uh, but I, I agree, Mary is, uh, we learned much more about her through these letters. But, uh, it's, it seems like Junior slash Arnold doesn't really know her well himself. And he's like, wait, you're telling me my sister is smart and she wanted to be an author, but it seems like they don't talk as much as we might expect about these things which, which might be why they feel like less of a presence.

I know Sherman Alexie has really said that that Rowdy is the character that he almost feels like the book is equally about Rowdy, um, as it is about Arnold. But, and I wonder too if it has anything to do with just, um, respect for their privacy because this is considered, I think you said, Alanna, that it is 78% autobiographical, um, that he doesn't want to, um to give away too much about his mom and his dad and his sister in particular. Um And about his grandmother, the only thing we really get about her is, you know, she's a matriarch but and revered. Um and that I think is cultural. Um But yeah, I feel like like he's intentionally not fleshed them out more. He doesn't want to, he doesn't want to, yeah, just invade their privacy.

But should we talk about Rowdy a little bit more?

We absolutely should. Um Although we, but while we're still on parents, um I had one or two brief things to say, I thought the dad was very interesting in terms of how he is both portrayed as an alcoholic and a good dad. And you know, the the voids are there, the the faults are not skimmed over the effects of the alcoholism, you know, are definitely mentioned, but also a loving father. So I just thought that was an interesting take on it considering how many people that he describes as, uh, you know, drinking on the res and, um, and the, for the, for mom, I loved the

piece at the funeral. Uh, the grandma's funeral about turning away that rich white guy who is trying to give back the ancestral costume and she was like, nope, that mom did not do pow wow dancing. Yeah.

No, that, that was a great moment. And just to add one more thing about the dad, as you said, Dorothy. Um, one moment that encapsulated that tension, I think for me was when his dad disappears for Christmas for several days and, um, to go drink and his dad comes home after Christmas and he pulls out a wet \$5 bill from his boot. And Junior says, you know, it must have been so hard for him to save that last \$5 for me when I'm sure he really wanted to use it on more alcohol. Um, but also it's just so incredibly sad that he missed Christmas and like this is how he turns up and shows that he loves me.

Pulls a so, yeah, you, you get a little bit of that too when, um, when Junior tells his parents that he wants to go to, he wants to leave the rez to go to the other school, which happens to be 22 miles away and there's no bus and, um, you know, the dad's like, yeah, sure, I'll, I'll drive you. Um, and he drives him, you know, at least the first day and then, you know, it becomes very sporadic after that because dad's not always reliable or there's no money left over for gas, presumably because the money has been spent elsewhere, probably on alcohol. Um, and that kind of thing. But yet they still supported him, you know, 100%.

Ok. So Rowdy, um, Rowdy has been his best friend since childhood. Rowdy beat, uh, defends him from the bullies. And so that's important. Um, and Rowdy is just, it's, I, I find it hard to really wrap my head around the violence and how they somehow bond over this. What, what do you guys think?

It's, it is challenging for me to understand too because Rowdy is dealing with violence in his home. His dad is, um, an abuser, um, seems to physically abuse Rowdy and his mom and, um, so Rowdy escapes to Junior's house where he feels safe and is always welcome to holidays and things like that. So he's dealing with a really tough situation at home and one way he deals with that is to try to act really tough around other people on the rez. And, um, yeah, he seems to feel this need to protect Junior, especially because he has such a sensitive head.

Yeah, a lot of how they seem to bond is, is insult humor, which to, when I read that sort of thing, I always say in my mind, oh, the boy wrote this book. This is a, a male perspective and uh and I

deal with it in school a lot students say things to each other that are not nice and they're not actually they, it, they're not fighting, they're not bullying, right? These are their friends but they'll still say these awful things and I always tell them mean jokes are still mean. Uh but it is definitely a representation that we see here and elsewhere that there is a certain amount of bonding that happens through insulting one another. And maybe it's because maybe it's because you can discuss each other's flaws but still know that you care that you'll always be there. I don't know.

Yeah. But uh but that very much defines their relationship, I think. And comics. Right. Yes. Yeah.

True. But, and, and then they have like their, their set of unspoken rules like Junior cannot draw Rowdy and Junior cannot touch Rowdy, nobody can touch Rowdy. Um And you know, that's just an understanding that they have. It was interesting to hear Sherman Alexie talking about the man that inspired the character of Rowdy who I cannot uh at the moment remember his name and it's on audio. So I can't look it up at right this second. But um it was very similar to Rowdy. So it was like Randy or Rocky or something along those lines. Um But he talked about when I met uh this uh person had moved to his school from some other, I don't know if it was another part of the res or, um, a different reservation but there, there was, you know, he had gotten into a fuss with some other students and, uh, Sherman was just sure he was now gonna get, also, get beat up. He was trying to stay out of it, but somehow the two of them he called, he said it was like love at first sight, but friendship, friendship at first sight. So, uh I just thought that was kind of interesting uh backstory to understand that it was almost never a choice. You know, it was just like we get each other in some way. It's interesting.

Should we move on to Junior's white friends?

Yeah. Sure. Um Although maybe before we leave the rest, let's talk a little bit about the teacher that sort of pushes him to go. Sure, because he's such an interesting character. He's been teaching there for a long time and tells us about basically how they, uh the directive when he first started was to uh kill the Indian to save the child. Uh And they would, you know, try to beat their culture out of them, which he doesn't seem to practice anymore. And he clearly acknowledges that that makes him a bad guy. So in some ways, he's kind of trying to redeem himself by saying I haven't helped a single um native American child on this reservation, but I could help you by telling you to get out. I just thought it was, it was just such an interesting

space and I, you know, you have to think about why would someone just continue to stay? Right.

Yeah. That, that's a great point, Dorothy. He mentions at one point that Mr P, this teacher, is a lonely old man who used to be a lonely, young man. And for some reason I don't understand, lonely white people love to hang around lonelier Indians.

Interesting. And it's sorry, it's like, it's like it makes him feel valuable in some way to be helping people who are worse off. But as you said, when he started teaching, it was not to help them or maybe they thought it was to help them in this terrible stereotypical way.

I also feel like that teacher um represents sort of a mirror, not in a mirror, a window in for, you know, the stereotypical white person who is going to read this book in that, you know, maybe Mr P came there thinking he was going to do some good, as you said, Alanna. But thinking he was going to do some good from the perspective of, you know, a white person who, who doesn't really understand to save, save the natives, right? Yeah. And come to save the natives, which is very complicated. And um you know, and then through the process, he's become, I guess, in some ways more assimilated in that he lives on the reservation and he sees the poverty and alcoholism and the difficulty of um anyone who lives on a reservation ever being able to leave it and the limited opportunities. And you know, yeah, he, he suffers by being surrounded by helplessness. He does the same way that he describes it to Junior and he's lonely because he's an outsider. Right?

Should we maybe talk about uh Junior's coach at his new school at as a, a contrast to Mr P?

I, I think we should. And I, I just want to preface this by saying we, we didn't mention Rowdy. Well, we mentioned Rowdy, but we didn't mention one aspect of Rowdy, which is that he is an excellent basketball player and he's a big guy and he can dunk. Um, and I think Junior, if I remember correctly, Junior's attraction to basketball really is just, it's something he does with Rowdy, but Rowdy is the real star and it turns out Junior can shoot pretty well. And so, yeah, and so well, self described by Junior. Um, so he, um, comes to the new school and, um, the, the boys he meets there want to know if he's going to go out for the basketball team and he's like, yeah, sure. And so then he meets the coach and, um, I'll let you guys jump in at this point.

Sure. So I thought that, uh his coach ends up being one of the most important people in Junior's development because he is his mentor and someone who really cares about him as a person, as well as a basketball player. He gives him chances to play, he encourages him and he sits with him the entire night after he gets injured when they by Rowdy when they play the res, um, school. Um, and, uh, it seems like Coach is the most important adult in his life outside of his own family.

Yeah, I would agree with that. And, and having been on numerous teams throughout my growing up, um, coaches do become very, very important in your life because you know what starts out as, oh, we're going to, you know, coach this team and hopefully have success, becomes a really in depth teaching opportunity where you have to get to know each individual and what makes them tick, so to speak. And, and so a coach, a coach also being someone who's not family becomes almost like a, a therapist in the sense that they can, you know, you can say things to your coach that you, you wouldn't say to your, your family because you wouldn't want to hurt anybody. And, um, the coach gets a better understanding and there's just that little bit of distance where the coach sees who Junior really is and sees, you know, more than just his basketball skills, but sees his, the full, the full Indian that he is not the part time Indian.

Should we talk about some of the other people at Reardan a little bit more like Gordy?

Yeah. And by the way, Reardan is the real name of that school. Right. Interesting. Interesting. Um, that it wasn't changed, uh, which probably means that the reservation school, that's its real name. Really? Were the Redskins. Yeah. Which I found interesting.

Yes. And I saw that there was a news article, um, pretty recent, uh, where they just decided in the last couple of years I think, to change the name from Redskins. But, um, that was its name. And Reardan's, um, name was also, I, I forget, but it was also, it was also, yes, I mean, it was related to Indians in some way and objectionable. So, um, I guess Washington State recently passed a law that, um, they can, they can change the names of things if they object to them or something like that. Um, so, yeah, at Reardan he first befriends Gordy. I really liked Gordy's character. He was also a big contrast with Rowdy. Um, he's incredibly smart. Uh, he teaches Junior slash Arnold. I mean, he's Arnold there. Um, so many things about, uh, life, um, about being a student. He teaches him how to study, he teaches him how to read really carefully and

he shows how much he loves books and learning and I think that brings out those things in Arnold even more than, uh, they were there before.

Uh, I was, um, a lot, I've heard this a lot in reading of characters and deciding whether or not they exist on, uh, they're neurodiverse in some way. Um, and I could definitely read Gordy as maybe on the autism spectrum. Uh, and it works so positively here because he's willing to just have a frank discussion about things without maybe realizing that they're, they're, you know, most people wouldn't bring them up or wouldn't talk about them. Um, so I just, I found that that's a great sort of trait of Gordy's to just sort of blurt out what he's thinking.

Right. And he's the first one to stick up for Arnold because Arnold said something correct in class and Arnold thank him. And he's like, no, I was just saying that you were correct. That's, I was trying to stick up for you as a person.

He just just, I mean, I think that's a, that's a very autistic head space to be in. It's just like I'm going to say the truth, I'm saying my truth and being maybe a little bit unaware of the other, you know, that he is sticking up for Rowdy for, I'm sorry for, for Arnold when he does that.

Yeah. And then Arnold is very upfront with him later. He's like, we should be friends, you know, we have things in common. You're weird. I'm weird. We should be friends. I love that. They're great. What did you think of Roger as his friend?

I, so how it was great that Roger changed his attitude. I don't love that it was because he got punched in the face. Um, I don't know that people who would, he's the one who told the offensive joke, right? Was that him or one of his? It was him, it was him, it was him. Um, I don't know how much I believe that that person can then become such a, such a good friend later. But I like that it happened because people often behave a certain way that they think they're expected to societally. So I think it did show some growth that he did become friends uh with Arnold, but I don't know how much I believed it.

Yeah. Well, but I also think it, it kind of shows the tribal culture of everyone, you know. So Ro Roger is there with his, his friends, you know, his group as, you know, they have that um where he's so insulting of, of Arnold and then Arnold reacts, you know, as a tough guy and, you know, it's almost like it's almost like hazing, you know how I saw it. Um And then it was like, oh, ok,

you're cool. Right. You can hang with us and you wonder, I mean, if Roger had been alone, you know, I mean, if all of us were alone, ever meeting someone, we'd probably behave differently.

Right. That makes me think that maybe he was kinder than he appeared at the beginning. So maybe there isn't this, like, stark, uh, change in character quite as much as it seems to us on the surface. But sure it brings out the idea that that human beings are complex and he's probably a really great guy to all of his friends. Right. And the fact that he was, he looked out for Arnold as a big brother, you know, paying for him when he realizes Arnold has no money at dinner, taking him all the way home, which is so far, um, looking out for him in so many ways. I mean, he really does try to be this big brother figure to him. And Penelope is another interesting and complex character. What did you think of Penelope?

I'm waiting, I'm waiting since I chimed in the first time for Marian to go.

Ok. Well, I mean, again, she, she's prepared not to like him. I mean, she's sort of nice to him but then she finds something to, to tease him about, you know, which is, you know, what, what's your name? Really? Um, but I mean, Penelope has got her own demons. We don't really know that much about what her demons are, but she's, um, she's the character who, who has, uh bulimia. So, you know, I, I think there, that kind of follows a theme that we'll get into next of, you know, everybody has pain and we don't always see their pain. We don't know what it is.

Right. Um, so, yeah, I, I agree with that, Marian, and, and it seems like to some extent she's maybe using Arnold to get back at her dad. We get a sense of that because he does not approve of Arnold or his daughter dating Arnold. So, um, it seems like they have a tense relationship and she's trying to do some things for appearance sake. Um, like, you know, raising money for homeless people on Halloween. Um, and it's like, well, maybe she does believe that to some extent. But how much is this an act? How much is she performing? And how much does she really believe? And I, I can believe that she cares about Arnold, but is she dating him or semi dating him to make a point to people or does she actually care about him that way? And he seems to realize that, well, maybe she doesn't care about him as much as he wishes she would.

Yeah. Their relationship is very interesting and probably typical, far more typical of a regular high school relationship than the kinds of love stories we often read about. Uh, because you

just, you don't often find your soulmate in high school, you know? Uh, so they enjoy each other's company and they have to keep hanging out. Maybe they're both getting something out of it, but that's ok and, and that's all sort of why you start a relationship but they hang, they continue to hang out together. So, you know, it's, there's clearly enough going for it that they can, you know, it's not like they are entirely pretending and it's only for show. Right. That's right. So, I just, I kind of liked that sort of acknowledgement that, uh, you know, not all relationships are, I'm gonna marry this person. Sure. And they did, he does talk about the things they have in common, you know, dreams of getting out of the small town out traveling. Yeah. Uh, wanting more. Yeah, that's true. Yeah. And he knows her secret. I don't know how big a secret it is in a small town being bic, I, I don't know if you can keep that a secret if he heard it. Odds are other people might be aware of it as well. But, um, but he's willing to talk about it, you know, straight on with her and not to, I, he doesn't preach, you can't do that and he doesn't say that it's fine either. He sort of acknowledges that it is a flaw that he's aware of and then drops it, which I think is pretty interesting.

Yeah, I was just thinking about, um, how few female characters there are in this book at all. Um, you know, mom, mom is, is a character for sure. But per, you know, I don't wanna say peripheral but not fully flushed out. Um, Mary, the sister we know is not fully flushed out. We've talked about that um, grandma, Grandma Spirit, Grandmother Spirit. You know, we, we learn a little bit about her because she's older and they have some, you know, some in depth conversations, but we learned most of it after we learned that she died.

Right. Right. And Penelope is kind of the same way. She's, she's more peripheral like we, we, she's part of the story but she's not as much or important. A part of the story as Gordy and Roger and Rowdy and the coach, you know, um she's as important as Roger. Ok. Yeah, maybe in a, a different way that she's important to, but it just feels like it's a very surface level. Yeah, that it's a more masculine oriented book, which it is, I mean, it definitely doesn't pass the Bechdel test, right? I mean, I guess I'm thinking of it more in terms of going back to the fact that it's 78% autobiographical. It is about a boy. It's going to, it's about what formed Sherman Alexie. It's about, you know, well, 78% about how Sherman Alexie became the person, the grown up that he is. Um And, you know, I don't know, I, I guess I have to, I guess I'm jumping ahead to themes, maybe.

Marian, did you want to mention the reservation a little bit more before we move to themes?

I do. Um because I think the reservation itself kind of presents as another character. And um because the reservation is, is an entity that is hard to get away from. Um it, it kind of like I just envision these, you know, intertwined arms around the periphery saying no, no, you belong here, you must stay here and um and the voices but um towards the very end of the book and I believe that I have the same version that Alanna refers to. So on page 216 um there's, there's this, um, a couple of lines that just really triggered me as I, as I was coming to the conclusion of the book. And, um, I'm gonna read, um, those lines, reservations were meant to be prisons, you know, Indians were supposed to move on to reservations and die, we were supposed to disappear. But somehow or another Indians have forgotten that reservations were meant to be death camps. So that just was very triggering to me in the sense that I, I know I've talked about this book before is one that I read the book *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson, which, um, went into research about, you know, kind of the, the forming of America and, and how we've the things that our country did led to, um, race as a caste system in America. And the fact according to research that, uh Hitler actually studied closely what Americans did to the Native Americans to kill them off, to round them up to have these death marches to, um, the reservations and inevitably to leave the native Americans in such a, on such horrible land that no one else wanted and essentially leave them with no resources, you know, with, with the thought. Well, if they just all die, that's fine. And that, that motivated Hitler in, you know, determining how to, um, obliterate the Jews from, from Germany and inevitably from the rest of the, of Europe and probably the world was his goal. So that, that line, um, really brought that full circle for me. And um, I'm just wondering what, what you all thought of that.

Yeah, that's such a powerful moment, Marian, thank you for bringing it up. Um It, it does feel so much like a prison in a lot of the book. And um, there are very few people who escape. Like they, they think it's really weird and a betrayal when people leave and it seems like Arnold leaving to go to Reardan uh inspires his sister Mary to uh get married to someone she just met at the casino and go off to Montana with him. But for the most part people just stay there and even though there are no physical walls, it, it's, it seems like there's, it's they, there's so much inherited uh poverty and few opportunities. So trying to escape the reservation is so difficult and yet, um, near the very end, I don't want to spoil this. Exactly. But um, we see that uh Arnold is up in this really, really high tree. And uh he um looks down at the reservation and sees the beauty in it. And so even though a place can be i terrible in many ways, or even if you did not choose to live there or grow up there, there can still be um special things about it. And he

realizes how much he loves so many of the people who are there too. So it's um it's pointing out that the reservation can be both at once, which is uh such an important message.

I think it ties in with the, the amount of violence that happens on a regular basis, whether it's because of alcoholism, uh which was also something that white people introduced, seeing that it had a profound effect on Native American, you know, biology um to further undermine them. But the there's this simultaneously this love for everyone on the reservation and yet they're kind of vicious to each other, which maybe the, maybe the point of that is that it, it is also pointing out that uh that irony that they are stuck there, but all they have is each other. So there is this sort of love hate that shared sense of trauma as well.

I go further on in that book on, on or in that passage uh on to page 217 where um Sherman Alexie talks about uh Arnold or Junior um realizing the intricacies of who he actually is and he realizes he says I might be a lonely Indian boy, but I'm not alone in my loneliness. There were millions of other Americans who had left their birthplaces in search of a dream. I realized that sure, I was a Spokane Indian. I belonged to the tribe, but I also belong to the tribe of American immigrants and the tribe of basketball players and to the tribe of book worms and to the tribe of cartoonists and so on. Um And there's another list of about 10 tribes that he claims to belong to. And I, I found that um beautiful in a sense because in the end, you know, so he, when he leaves the reservation, he goes off to the, to the white school and has his illusions about what white people are and the white people have illusions about what Indians are. And then as they go through a year or so together and dealing with traumas together, they recognize. Well, wait, I'm not just this one thing, I am many things and so are you and we can, we can um respect each other's similarities, which there are more similarities amongst human beings than differences. I thought that was a really powerful understanding there. Yeah. Yeah. And really one of the most forward thinking kind of ideas that lasts in the book. Uh and that we are, you know, encouraging people as a society more and more to think about the different tribes that they belong to.

Well, I think that leads really well into our discussion of themes if that's all right with both of you. OK. I think we've introduced most of the themes already in our discussion of the characters. So it's hard not to. So maybe we should just um do a recap of the themes that we've mentioned um that are important to us and to the book we think. So, uh one of the themes I thought was most important was the importance of someone believing in you and believing in yourself. We see that um Arnold slash Junior probably would not have made the choice to leave the to go to

Reardan if Mr P, his teacher, hadn't suggested the idea to him and saying like you're smart, you should do this. Um He never realized that he was smart, he never realized that he had this potential. And similarly, once he gets to Reardan, it's people there believing in him like Gordy and like his coach um that helps him to flourish there eventually. And uh when other people believe in you, it's so much easier for you to believe in yourself. And um he believes in Rowdy. He says to Rowdy, you can come with me, you can leave the re too and rowdy resists that. But um it seems like just having someone else believe in you and then you believe in yourself. Um It takes away these limitations that have been imposed on you by other people. And, um, I, I just found that to be so beautiful.

Um, it, he talked about it, um, at one point too about how he didn't understand that he was smart until the teacher told him because, um, you know, as a teacher this, oh, is it rang that teacher bell of, uh, expectations about expectations you have for children? And he was never expected to do well. And so he didn't.

Yes, I, I think that's exactly right that, uh he mentions that most of the teachers at the school in the are, are white and don't care about the students and no one is putting money into the school or into their education. They have books that are 30 years old. Uh, they clearly don't care about educating them properly. So the fact as you said that someone, um sees this potential in him is so, um, is the change for him and he also realizes that he can go outside of his comfort zone and try something new. And Penelope is someone else like that as we mentioned, who wants to go new places and do new things. But most of the people in their community, either in the small town of Reardan or on the rez are just stuck in their lives and in what they think they can achieve. And it's only a few people like Arnold slash Junior and his sister Mary who do try something new, um, which doesn't always work out the way you want, but at, at least they try.

Yeah. And I think it points out too, you know, that, you know, all of us are born into a family in a, in a place, in a situation and that place and that family and that situation definitely forms the core of who we are. But it's also as much as it may be supportive and affirming, it's also very limiting if you never see anything outside of that. But if we step outside and experience ourselves through other people's eyes, then we see, oh my gosh, maybe I do have a talent that I never knew I had. Right. So, well, Dorothy, do you want to go to the next theme?

I do because this one spoke to me a lot. Um It was about hope. Um And I'm starting with this sort of hopelessness that, that, uh, that the Indians feel on the reservation. Uh I just wanna read briefly from this scene where he is talking to Mr P and Mr P is explaining that he, um he needs to leave and he says, uh, you've been fighting since you were born, you fought off that brain surgery, you fought off those seizures, you fought off all the drunks and drug addicts. You kept your hope and now you have to take your hope and go somewhere where other people have hope. And then he goes to have a conversation with his parents. And he says, who has the most hope and uh without really any sense of being ironic, they said white, white people have the most hope, which is why, um, he goes, uh those Reardan kids, they were filled with hope. Um And it seemed like some mythical creature to him. And part of the reason this spoke to me so much is because when he is describing the culture on the reservation and the amount of drinking and violence, I couldn't help but connect that to some of the ratcheted up violence and rhetoric that we're seeing in the world today. And particularly we're having a sort of post COVID change that we're seeing among youth uh as a culture just um there's more uh bad decision making, more fighting happening in the schools, just more of all of that stuff, uh more drugs, you know, vaping and, and the um uh the pills and it occurred to me that young people these days might not be seeing as much hope as what we were used to in our youth that the planet is undergoing a major change. They don't even necessarily have an idea that there will be a world when they grow up. Uh They think, you know, inflation going nuts, uh pandemics, earthquakes, fires, the planets burning. I mean, I just could I see a connection between the, the lack of hope on the reservation and maybe the lack of hope that we're seeing in some of today's youngest people. Uh, so that just, that really spoke to me and it, it carries throughout this idea of hope and, um, when, when you have it, it allows you to do, do things like leave the reservation.

That's really interesting. Dorothy. I hadn't thought about those connections to what we've observed in some of our students recently.

And and not just, uh, you know, I mean, like, I've, I've read articles, right. It's not just personal experience. Right? No, I, I think that's true and, um, it seems like when you feel stuck, when you feel like things aren't going to change, um, as you said, it just leads to more and more problems and trauma rather than to changing things and getting out of there. So, looking for hope, following hope is so important for some of the characters, especially for Arnold.

I agree. Well, and I think that takes us into our next theme that we picked out, which is, uh, about pain that anyone can have pain and can deal with it in different ways. And I see, I think we've talked pretty um explicitly about the different characters in this book and the, and the ways they have dealt, dealt with pain in different ways. Um, but it also kind of goes back to what you just shared, Dorothy, about, you know, the effect of the last few years on, um, hope and pain that people are feeling globally and you know, the pandemic really, um, changed our world, um, beyond just the obvious, you know, the economic and the, um, you know, all of that. But, but it kind of put all of us during lockdown into our own sort of reservation, one could say, and, you know, you think about how you personally or people that, you know, responded, um, obviously, you know, from what you have shared about the students at school and what I've heard and observed, um, the students didn't fare well, the teachers didn't fare well. Um, being cut off from physically, being in a school sharing, um, ideas and, and having downtime together has been very, uh, deleterious for our kids and, um, and for grown ups as well and as you just said, we've all kind of dealt with that pain in, in many different ways as well. Um, so now in the book, of course, he brings that up in terms of alcohol use is one of the ways that, um, that people on the reservation deal with their pain and the bulimia is a way that Penelope deals with her pain. I think that's the scene where he brings it up. Right. Right. Um, yeah, and everybody deals with the pain by beating everyone else out. Um, yeah. Um, Mary deals with the pain by living in the basement and then eventually, you know, marrying a virtual stranger and leaving to go to Montana.

And of course, that, that discussion leads directly into the, the next thing we were going to talk about, which is the problems that arise if trauma is not dealt with properly. So, uh if when trauma is not dealt with properly, that results in pain, which results in different ways of dealing with that pain, the logical connection there. And not that I think there's an easy way to deal with the trauma of the past and the way that we treated Native Americans, there is no easy way, but certainly no one's helping them try to find a productive way to deal with it.

Well, Marian, do you want to talk about the next theme? A little bit more? Well, so we've talked about, um and I've alluded to it, you know, a, a couple of times about how individuals have multiple identities that we, we're not ever just one thing, I'm not just a librarian, I'm not just uh a podcaster, I'm not, you know, whatever. Um And, and all of the, the identities that we all assume, you know, is sometimes help us to belong and they sometimes can pull us away from, from belonging. Um in, in Junior's case, being smart and having essentially an outsider, Mr P,

telling him that he was smart and that the only place for you to um to benefit from your intelligence, your high intelligence is to leave the place that you, you know, belong in essence. Um And so that, that always involves, you know, making a painful decision. Um you know, choosing just, just in choosing how we respond to different situations and considering what our identities are. Um you know, it just, it broadens my thinking about how do we relate to each other and, and how do we determine who we belong to and, and the, you know, the inherent hope really that is involved in choosing who we belong to. If we think we're smart, then we probably spend time with other smart people and, you know, tend to pay better attention in class and do our homework and, you know, think of our futures with in a hopeful way if we are in a group that um you know, doesn't consider that there are ever any opportunities for us because there are no scholarships for, you know, the dreamer generation or, or there's, you know, whatever um then that, you know, becomes a self fulfilling prophecy for people who just, you know, hide in that identity and don't see themselves as something more than that.

Yeah. And I think that ties in really well with the last thing we wanted to talk about, which is the importance of understanding other cultures and learning other perspectives because uh you can't figure out where you belong or what your potential is. As Marian was saying, without understanding who you are and who other people are, and if you are only around people like you, you probably will not achieve everything you want to achieve or everything you're capable of achieving. And uh this especially came up when he talked about Grandmother Spirit and the fact that she believed in tolerance and she definitely was, I think the wisest character in the book. And she told him that, um, you know, she didn't care about people's sexual orientations. She didn't care about the way people looked. She was always interested in meeting people from other tribes and other communities because people are people. And uh it seems like that idea rubbed off onto Arnold and he's much more interested in learning about other people. And he also by um integrating Reardan High School um teaches a lot of white people there what some Indians are like and uh for instead of just the stereotypes they were aware of. And um so it seems like one person's actions can also help other people understand the world better.

Yeah, well said, well said, shall we move into our final segment where we try to dig into the text with a couple of different techniques? Sounds great. OK. So our final segment is um significance and um I have chosen to bring up a documentary that I think relates very well to this story. Um The documentary that I wanna mention is um a documentary from 2011 that is called Off the Rez. Um And it is a true story of a different Native American family that uh left the rez.

Um So there was a mom, a Native American mom who had eight children. Um The mom had been a very successful basketball player but had stayed on the rez and didn't take opportunities to, um you know, follow the dream, so to speak. So as she sees that her oldest daughter has tremendous talent and at the age of 16 is already on everybody's watch list as one of the um best high school basketball players in the country. Um She decides the mom decides to make a leap, she leaves the res to go take a basketball coaching position at a high school in uh Portland, Oregon. Um The reservation had been in Oregon or is in Oregon and she takes her daughter with her and her daughter. Um as a result ends up, you know, having a fantastic junior and senior year gets recruited to a big name college, gets a free education, um and goes on to play for the WNBA. Um And so this true story is about uh a basketball player named Shoni Schimmel, um who at one point was actually on the all-star team for the WNBA and had a highly successful career. Um and it, uh it just felt like it really um touched on a lot of the same themes that we've been discussing. It's Upper Northwest. Um It's, you know, it ties in with the basketball and um and then the reservation feeling that, um you know, this family had abandoned the reservation to go off and live their dream and that, that is never an easy choice to make. Um, but sometimes in order to live your dream, you have to make hard choices. So nice to see that played out with some female characters as well, actually.

Yeah, that sounds so interesting. Marian, thank you. Yeah. No, I definitely would love to check it out. What did you say it was called? It's called Off the Rez, and um I don't, I don't know who's showing it right now. It might be available on prime, but it might be for a fee. So um it's something to look into.

Yeah. Yeah. Uh so I um did come up with a question uh about the text that I wanted to pose and try to answer. Uh and so when they have their big rematch basketball game, um and uh with spoilers, which we're allowed to do, uh they win and it's very much feels to um Arnold asa David and Goliath story. We, the, the kids of Reardan who haven't had the best season who were beat the time before and they literally knocked him unconscious. We're gonna come back and just against all the odds, you know, win the game. David and Goliath and then Arnold has that realization that in fact Reardan is Goliath and the school is David, but this season for them, you know, would have been there, David and Goliath moment. So it and, and then just becomes very upset at this realization. Uh It, it, so I guess my question is, how do we as humans? How can we tell when we're Goliath? Because we all feel like David.

Hm hm. That's an interesting question.

I'm pretty sure that the, the Trump supporters felt like David, uh that the insurrectionists felt like David against the Goliath of the government that uh when I don't know just any personal battle that we fight, you know, we feel like the underdog and I think we need to understand better when we're, when we're not right. You don't think about, uh, the context in which this is taking place and the, where different people are coming from and the advantages and disadvantages that they've inherited and all those things.

Yeah. Yeah, that's interesting. It's funny too because it strikes me, I mean, this is completely, well, it's a little bit off topic but, you know, I've been watching the basketball tournament, the basketball tournament, the NCAA basketball tournament and, you know, the first weekend has a lot of, you know, upsets where the higher seed, much higher seed is beaten by the much lower seed. And that is sort of a David and Goliath set up as well and it amuses me how much people jump on the bandwagon of, you know, the David, they want, they want the underdog to win no matter who it is. You know, you know, even if they're having the worst season they've ever had. They want the underdog to beat the big name school, you know.

Well, and it, and it plays into our, our, you know, like tendency to think in narratives. I mean, the fact that we all know what David and Goliath means, you know, is a testament to even people who are not raised with Bible stories have probably heard this. Um, we like to think in terms of story and we like to build our lives in terms of story. That's our understanding of the whole entire world is how we perceive it as a story in our brains. Just well, it speaks to a lot of the other themes, right? But we need to be able to see other sides and to um experience different people who are, who are living different stories. Y

eah, for sure, for sure. That was a really good point. Well, for a passage that spoke to us, I chose a scene just before this basketball game that Dorothy was talking about their second match up with the school on the reservation. And uh this is a moment when Coach is trying to encourage Arnold before he goes out to play. And um as we said, Rowdy knocked him unconscious last time. So this is a matchup with his former best friend and uh he's been very anxious about it, but uh his coach believes in him. And this goes with the first theme that I mentioned earlier. So it says you can do it. Coach said again, he didn't shout it. He whispered it like a prayer and he kept whispering again until the prayer turned into a song. And then for

some magical reason, I believed in him. Coach had become like the priest of basketball and I was his follower and I was going to follow him onto the court and shut down my best friend. I hope so. I can do it. I said to coach, to my teammates, to the world, you can do it. Coach said I can do it, you can do it. I can do it. Do you understand how amazing it is to hear that from an adult? Do you know how amazing it is to hear that from anybody? It's one of the simplest sentences in the world. Just four words, but they're the four hugest words in the world when they're put together, you can do it. I can do it. Let's do it.

That's really powerful. Yeah. What a great way to close things up. Sounds like the conversations we had before starting this podcast. We can do it.

We do it by golly, we're doing it. This is our 14th episode, Holy Moly. All right. Um Well, we'll go ahead and wrap up for the day. Um In the next two episodes, we will be discussing um a picture book. So we're, we're gonna go in a different direction for, um just for a change. Um the book we will be discussing is called *The Librarian of Basra* by Jeannette Winter. And if you would like to leave us a question or comment, please visit theroguelibrarians.com or follow us on Instagram or Facebook @roguelibrarianspod or on Twitter @RLibrarians. If you're enjoying this podcast, please subscribe on Apple podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you find your podcasts, and please leave us a rating and review. Additionally, please consider supporting us on Patreon as a patron at patreon.com/roguelibrarians. You can hear our book recommendations and other bonus audio content and we will give you personalized book recommendations and other great perks. As always, we want to thank our fabulous um creative music, uh creator Chris um for our music and to Lizzie for doing the audio editing. As always, we just wanna give them a shout out because without their great talents and time we could not have done this podcast. Finally, thank you to all of you for reading with us because books are meant to be read. Bye!