On Reading *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* at EMU

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The thing that most compels me to read and reread Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is that in telling the story of Arnold Spirit, Jr., Alexie demonstrates, in heart-breaking, beautiful, and hilarious ways, a depth of hidden rules and assumptions that shape our expectations of others and our hopes for ourselves. The book is heavily autobiographical, and it readily invites exploration of fictional themes with real world implications. We can discuss how this text exposes privilege and lack of privilege in racial and economic terms. We can consider how social narratives create opportunities and limitations for imagined possible selves. We can marvel at Arnold’s capacity for agency and self-direction when many around him succumb to the expectations of poverty and failure. Arnold needs no academic language to describe his experiences of navigating between the Spokane Indian reservation and the nearby White high school. In painfully candid description and cartoon drawing, he articulates what those experiences teach him about crossing boundaries, systemic injustice, personal tragedy, and the challenge of change.

What do we do with this book at Eastern Mennonite University? How do we enter into this story and find its themes crucial for us as a community? I read Alexie’s work as a teacher educator, former English teacher, and past urban school reform coach. From these vantage points, the function of school communities in fostering hidden expectations exposed in Arnold’s narrative is deeply troubling. I am haunted by the conversation Arnold has with Mr. P., the teacher whose nose he smashes with a thirty year old geometry book. In this exchange, Mr. P. admits his past participation in the educational goal of killing Indian culture and physically controlling children. Mr. P. apologizes for the pain he has inflicted on past students and urges Arnold to leave the reservation school where the primary lesson taught is how to give up. If you thrived in school and believe school to be the land of equal opportunity, this may seem outlandish, but a quick review of the historical structures and purposes of schooling shows such educational objectives to be painfully accurate for a variety of groups and individuals. I have never worked in a reservation school, but I have worked in suburban schools and urban schools. Even at EMU, I’ve encountered students whose school experiences have taught them how to quit trying. I worry then, are there ways that EMU in general, or my teaching in particular, signals groups or individuals that they should give up? Perhaps our reading invites conversation regarding subtle messages about expectations for success and failure.

For Arnold, attending a white high school as the only Indian is risky and alienating. The unspoken social codes at the new school baffle him. Arnold has spent his life learning to cope with bullies and school fights. He knows the unspoken conditions that require a fight on the reservation, and there are many. For example, on the reservation, if you think you’ll lose, you must take the first punch because it might be your only shot. Anything less than following these rules risks losing an unbearable degree of face in front of peers. Acting according to reservation rules at the new school, however, doesn’t work out as expected for Arnold. According to those rules, the level of racist insults flung at him by a popular football player gives Arnold no choice but to sock him in the face. The follow-up defies the social codes that Arnold’s known his whole life. He is completely befuddled when the bloody-nosed bully is stunned, does not hit back, and befriends him the next day. At EMU, I am less worried about a brawl breaking out; yet, I am concerned for the varied and important unspoken social codes that may confound various students in varied ways. In what ways do we help students from differing backgrounds navigate unspoken social codes of which they and we may not be aware? Is there a space in the reading of this book for discussing those social codes?

Some of the hidden and unspoken codes in school communities are academic rather than social. For example, the act of studying is more mysterious and nuanced than you may think. Arnold’s friend, the freakishly genius Gordy, teaches Arnold how to study and describes to Arnold exactly how to read books. If you have ever struggled with reading in elementary school or graduate school, you know the steps to this powerful and invisible cognitive process are not easy, yet strong readers make it seem simple. Gordy suggests you read a book three times. First you read for the overall flow of the story; then you read for the historical connections, along with the meaning of each word; and finally, you read for the joy of the experience of connecting your thinking to the author’s craft and the community of readers. (His description of the joy is much funnier and more joyful and, in part, why the book has been challenged in a number of school districts!) I suggest that reading this text in these three ways might offer us a powerful way to enter into a discussion of this book.

Reading for the flow and momentum of the book draws us into the story. We are swept along to laugh and weep with Arnold. Stopping at this reading, however, would risk knowing the book merely as a funny and sad story of a kid who makes his way through hard times. Reading for the historical knowledge and meaning of each word requires a deeper look at structures, biases, and hidden codes that debilitate communities and make it nearly impossible for a student like Arnold to believe and act on an assumption that he deserves better. This is heavy stuff. Gordy reminds us that we need to take each word seriously, but not too seriously. This is serious, but there is joy, too, so finally we must read for that. It is with joy that we connect with the complexity, pain, and wonder of the human experience, our place in this community and in the world. Alexie’s book challenges us to go further in noticing hidden rules, expectations, and assumptions that make it difficult to challenge injustices. For some of us, reading *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* will feel like a distant cross-cultural experience, yet the text also points our attention toward subtle cultural boundaries in our local communities. We can explore this cross cultural angle right here at EMU. As Gordy notes to Arnold, “The world, even the smallest parts of it, is filled with things you don’t know.”