

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian Study Guide

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian by Sherman Alexie

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Plot Summary

Arnold Spirit, Junior, lives on the Indian Reservation near the town of Wellpinit. He attends school there and is completely excited about beginning high school. He is especially looking forward to studying geometry. Then he's given his book and discovers it is the same book his mother used in high school. He's so furious that the school can't replace books even once a generation that he slings the book at the teacher, breaking his nose. Junior is suspended which upsets his parents and grandmother greatly. Then Junior's teacher, Mr. P, tells Junior that he should attend a school off the Reservation. Junior thinks about the advice and presents his plan to his parents, who back him.

Junior begins school at Reardan High School and is initially ignored and teased. He gets into a fight with a guy who makes racist comments then befriends a boy who is very smart. Junior is soon enamored with a girl named Penelope and when he and Penelope become something of an "item," Junior's popularity is sealed. He makes the basketball team and is happy with his life at Reardan, despite the fact that he often has to walk all or part of the distance because his parents have such limited resources.

But Junior's life on the Reservation isn't wonderful. Many people, as his parents predicted, are angry at him because he dared to dream for something more than the Reservation can offer. Junior's best friend, Rowdy, is among those who make Junior's life miserable.

When Junior faces Rowdy on the basketball court, he's subjected to anger and actually receives a concussion that takes him out of the game. When the next game begins, Junior rushes to take the lead from Rowdy and the Reardan team wins easily. Junior is quickly ashamed of his desire for revenge because he knows the difficult lives lived by most of the team.

Junior's life is filled with death, much of it because of alcohol. His grandmother is run over by a drunk driver and dies. His father's best friend is shot in the face and killed over a drink. Then Junior's sister is drunk in her trailer with her husband when a fire consumes the trailer. Junior's sister never even wakes as she is burned to death.

As the story comes to a close, Rowdy comes to visit after school is out for the summer. Rowdy says he's still angry at Junior but is bored. Rowdy reveals that he'd always known Junior would decide to leave the Reservation and makes him promise to send postcards from wherever he travels. The two then spend the evening and into the night playing one-on-one basketball, but they don't keep score.



pages 1-24

pages 1-24 Summary

In "The Black Eye of the Month Club," Arnold Spirit, Junior, begins by pointing out that he was born with a birth defect, water on the brain. He says he was six months old when the doctors performed surgery to remove the excess water and he was not expected to live. He survived, obviously, and also escaped the prediction that he would have brain damage. He does, however, have some health issues because of the rocky start. One of those is that he had ten extra teeth and had to have them pulled. There are other problems, including a lopsided look because his eyes are not the same. His glasses, which come from the reservation as well, have "ugly, thick, black plastic" frames. He also has a stutter and a lisp which he says makes him the brunt of jokes and teasing which often turns into being physically tormented. He's beat up at least once a month simply for being a "retard on the rez." Junior says he wants to go outside but it's safer to remain at home, so he's developed hobbies that include reading and drawing cartoons.

In "Why Chicken Means So Much to Me," Junior says his family is very poor. They live on the Spokane Indian Reservation which Junior says is poor in and of itself. Arnold talks about hunger and says there's nothing that tastes better than a chicken leg from Kentucky Fried Chicken when he hasn't eaten in "approximately eighteen and a half hours."

Junior has a dog named Oscar who was a stray. When Oscar becomes sick, Junior initially blames it on the heat, but Oscar becomes worse and is obviously in pain. Junior pleads with his parents to take Oscar to the vet but there isn't enough money. When his father, Arnold, Senior, gets home, he tells Junior to carry the dog outside, planning to kill Oscar. Junior is furious. Junior says Oscar knows what's coming and is relieved but Junior runs away. He says he hoped to run faster than the sound of his father's gun, but no one can run that fast so he heard the sound.

Junior reveals a great deal about his feelings toward his parents when he realizes Oscar's death is imminent. He says his father is crying as he explains that Oscar is in pain and needs to be put out of his misery. Junior wants to hate his father for that weakness and wants to hate both his parents for their poverty, but he can't. Junior points out that his mother is very intelligent, reads constantly, and remembers everything she reads. His father is a gifted musician. Arnold believes they could both have become something more if "somebody had paid attention to their dreams."

In "Revenge Is My Middle Name," Junior is depressed following Oscar's death. He says he wants to disappear but his best friend, Rowdy, talks him out of it by pointing out that no one would notice anyway. Rowdy arrives one day with a bandage on his ear and says his father got drunk and hit him. Junior says his own parents are alcoholics but they don't ever hit him, though he sometimes believes his mother wants to hit him.



Rowdy suggests the boys go to the annual Powwow but Junior doesn't want to go. Rowdy promises to protect Junior from anyone who tries to bully him and he agrees to attend. The boys are separated when the Andrus triplets, who are thirty years old, beat up Junior. Rowdy's first concern when he finds Junior is whether the men hit Junior in the head. Because of the water on the brain, Junior's head can't take a direct hit without risking severe damage. The two boys watch the Andrus triplets and when they pass out from drinking, Rowdy shaves off their eyebrows and cuts off their braids. Junior says he felt a little guilty but the revenge felt good.

Junior says he loves to make Rowdy laugh and that Rowdy is probably more important in his life than his own family.

pages 1-24 Analysis

Junior lives on the reservation which he refers to as "the rez." He says that a white doctor provides dental care for the Indians but the dental visits are limited to one per year. Therefore, when Junior had to have ten teeth pulled, he had to have all of them pulled at the same time. To make it more painful, he says the dentist had the idea that Indians felt only half the pain and therefore needed only half the Novocain. This is one of Junior's first references to the differences between whites and Indians. The subject will be discussed again and again over the course of the story.

Junior sees his cartoons as a way to communicate, an obvious problem for him. Because of his stutter and his lisp, he apparently hates to try to communicate. He notes that if he draws a cartoon of a flower, everyone who looks at that cartoon can tell it's a flower. This is apparently important to Junior and seems to indicate his need to communicate with his fellow man. Arnold expresses this by comparing the world to "a series of broken dams and floods" and his cartoons to "tiny little lifeboats." However, his cartoon on this topic is arguably even more revealing. The cartoon shows Junior juggling a chain saw, a book of poetry, and a live rabbit while screaming "love me."

Junior reveals the vicious cycle of poverty on the Indian Reservation. He says the Indians are poor and have come to believe they are destined to be poor, therefore are unable to break free. An interesting point Junior makes is that being poor doesn't make a person stronger. Junior's desire for something better is seen in this and many other scenes of the book, and becomes an important theme in the book.

Junior, who is fifteen, points out that he and Rowdy were born on the same day at the Sacred Heart Hospital in Spokane. Junior, who is two hours older, was broken when he was born. He says that Rowdy was mad, and that nothing has changed since then.



Pages 25 through 53

Pages 25 through 53 Summary

In "Because Geometry Is Not a Country Somewhere Near France," Junior has a sister named Mary who "froze" after high school. She spends hours each day in the basement of the family home where she reads romance novels. Junior says he is excited to start geometry his first year of high school. The class is taught by a teacher he calls "Mr. P" who lives near the school and sometimes teaches in his pajamas. Junior says Mr. P is weird but the kids like him, mostly because he doesn't expect a lot. On the day Mr. P brings the geometry books to class, Junior is dismayed to discover the name "Agnes Adams" written on the front cover. He explains that Agnes Adams is his mother and the fact that he is expected to study from the same book his mother used makes Junior furious. He throws the book and hits Mr. P.

In "Hope Against Hope," Junior confirms that he was suspended for hitting Mr. P. His parents and grandmother say they are disappointed in Junior. A few days into his suspension, Mr. P arrives at Junior's house. Mr. P says he believes he'd harmed Indian children during his early years as a teacher because teachers in those days were taught to beat the unruly Indian children. Mr. P tells Junior that he forgives him for throwing the book. He then begins to talk about Mary, Junior's sister. Mr. P says Mary wanted to be a writer of romance novels but she'd been afraid people would laugh at her. Mr. P then instructs Junior to say he deserves better than the education he's getting. Mr. P then says Junior has to leave the Reservation. Junior is amazed by the advice but begins to see that Mr. P is right.

In "Go Means Go," Junior tells his parents he wants to transfer to another school. Their first thought is that he wants to go to Hunters or Springdale, schools on other parts of the Reservation where there are very poor whites and Indians attending together. Junior says he wants to transfer to Reardan High School, twenty-two miles from the Reservation, where the rich kids from the farming communities attend. Junior's parents quickly agree to the plan, seeing it as a way Junior can better himself, though his mother warns that the Indians will hate him for his ambition. Junior says he's aware of that.

In "Rowdy Sings the Blues," Junior announces his plan to Rowdy and asks Rowdy to change schools as well. Rowdy's immediate reaction is disbelief. He says Junior won't have the guts to go on his own. When he sees Junior is serious, he's furious and screams that he hates Junior. Junior tries to explain but Rowdy won't listen. Junior understands, at least to some degree. He says the Reardan athletic teams, including football, baseball, and basketball, beat the Reservation school the previous season. Rowdy plays all sports and both Rowdy and Junior play basketball. Junior says his worst two games of the season, with regard to scoring, were against Reardan. Junior touches Rowdy on the shoulder when Rowdy turns away, but Rowdy turns and shoves Junior, calling him names. Junior says Rowdy is now his enemy.



Pages 25 through 53 Analysis

Junior explains his thoughts when he discovers his geometry book had been used by his mother. That the Reservation school can't afford books even once a generation strikes Junior as sad, but it also strikes at his ability to achieve anything on his own. That book becomes a symbol of his inability to escape the poverty that is beating his family down.

Junior takes time to think about Mr. P's revelation about Mary's dream. Mr. P says Mary wanted to write romance novels but believed it was a fruitless dream and that people would laugh at her for it. Junior thinks that perhaps Mary had given up on her dream at some point, and that's why she spends so much time in the basement. Junior equates this with his father. He says his father spends a great deal of time in his bedroom, alone, watching television. The attitude is understandable. The family has lived with the attitude that they can achieve nothing better in life, an attitude passed down literally for generations. But Junior is looking for a way to escape the cycle, something that any of the others could also have done if they'd had the courage. However, Junior doesn't seem to realize that he's doing something remarkable by stepping out in search of hope. Instead, he points out what his mom and dad could have been "if somebody had noticed their dreams." Junior seems to put the responsibility for achieving a better life on the world rather than on his parents or his sister.

Junior doesn't expect opposition from his parents for his plan to attend another high school and he doesn't get any, other than the warning that he will be hated for it. Junior notes that his father is an alcoholic and his mother is a former alcoholic, but they want better lives for their children.



Pages 54 through 73

Pages 54 through 73 Summary

In "How to Fight Monsters," Junior is dropped off at Reardan school by his father who leaves him with the thought that the white students are no better than Junior. Junior knows that his father is wrong, and that his father knows it as well. His father then says that Junior is a warrior for taking this stand, a statement that catches Junior off guard. He stands outside for a while and considers options, including dropping out of school altogether, but gives up on those and goes inside. The secretary tells Junior he's been assigned to Mr. Grant's homeroom. He arrives and a girl named Penelope asks his name. He says his name is Junior which makes the girl laugh but then the teacher calls him Arnold Spirit and Junior has to explain to Penelope that his name is Arnold Spirit, Junior.

Junior points out there are many rules on the Reservation that are not applicable at Reardan. He says on the Reservation, you must fight who insults you or acts like they might insult you, or the son or daughter of anyone who fights your parents. The list goes on and includes the requirement to pick fights with the sons and daughters of anyone who works for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Junior says things at Reardan are different. The girls, like the Reservation girls, ignore him but the boys, apparently fearing that he might be a cold-blooded killer, simply call him names. One day a very large boy named Roger makes an incredibly racist remark toward Junior. Junior reacts by punching Roger and expects to be beaten up in return. Instead, Roger seems to be insulted. Junior is completely confused to realize that, apparently, white kids simply don't fight.

In "Grandmother Gives Me Some Advice," Junior worries about Roger coming back for revenge. Junior tells his grandmother about his worry and she says Roger was behaving like the lead dog of a pack, pushing around Junior - the new arrival - to see how far he could be pushed. She predicts that Junior will now have a reputation for being tough because he stood up for himself.

The next morning, Junior wakes his father for a ride to school but Arnold says they don't have enough gas to make the trip and goes back to sleep. Junior sets out on foot. As he sets out, Arnold's best friend, Eugene, comes by on his motorcycle. Eugene gives Junior a ride. When they arrive at the school, students are staring. Junior says he can understand it because Eugene has "braids down to his butt" and neither of them is wearing a helmet, which probably makes them look dangerous. As Junior is leaving Eugene, Eugene points out the sheer number of white kids. He asks Junior how he's getting along and Junior says he believes he's doing okay. Eugene then says that Junior is brave for taking this stand and that he could never do it. This makes Junior proud.

As Junior heads inside, Roger questions Junior about Eugene and seems impressed with the bike. Junior notes that his grandmother is a very wise woman after all.



Pages 54 through 73 Analysis

Junior's name becomes a symbol of the division between his life on the Reservation and his life at Reardan High School. He is called Junior on the Reservation and says no one thinks of that as odd. In fact, he points out that in a crowded store a person who calls out the name Junior will get several people responding. However, from the first moment in Reardan, Junior is called Arnold. (For the sake of clarity in this study guide, he is referred to as Junior and the name Arnold is used to refer to Junior's father.)

Junior says Eugene is like an uncle to him and he's apparently very fond of Eugene. He adds, in his initial description, that Eugene is "drunk all the time," but that it's not "stinky drunk." Eugene is a happy person and when he's drinking, which is pretty much all the time, he likes to sing, dance, and hug.

Junior is expecting to be tormented by his own people for his choice to attend Reardan but doesn't expect that some of the adults will admire him for it. He sees that admiration first from his father and then from Eugene. Junior hasn't expected that the adults will realize the depth of strength it takes to go through with his decision, but they do realize it and admire it.



Pages 74 through 98

Pages 74 through 98 Summary

In "Tears of a Clown," Junior remembers falling in love with an Indian girl named Dawn when he was twelve. He'd confessed his love to Rowdy then made Rowdy promise not to tell. Rowdy had promised and had kept that promise.

In "Halloween," Junior goes to school dressed as "a homeless dude," though he says it was a small step between his everyday wardrobe and his costume. Penelope was dressed as a homeless woman though Junior says she was "the most beautiful homeless woman who ever lived." He couldn't resist pointing out their matching costumes. Penelope says she's trying to bring attention to the plight of homeless people in the country. She says she's asking for change when she goes trick-or-treating and plans to donate the money to the homeless. Junior picks up the idea and says he'll do the same. He does though he is called names by some people on the Reservation who are angry that he's going to the white school. He does raise some money but some guys attack him and take the money. When he tells the story to Penelope, she puts his name on her own donation. Arnold expects Penelope to begin paying more attention to him but it doesn't happen.

In "Slouching Toward Thanksgiving," Junior says he is very lonely. He says he wakes every morning as an Indian on the Reservation and that somewhere along the road to Reardan, he becomes less Indian. Junior sits alone at lunch and has made no friends at school. He's very smart and one day in science class the teacher mentions petrified wood. Junior raises his hand, a surprise to the teacher because he never volunteers. Junior then points out that petrified wood is actually rock. The teacher is angry and asks Junior to explain the process, which he does, which makes the teacher even angrier. But then another really smart kid named Gordy backs Junior. Junior later thanks him but Gordy says he did it not to back Junior, but for science.

Junior sometimes rides the bus to the end of the bus line, which is the edge of the Reservation. Sometimes he has a ride waiting for him there but sometimes he has to walk the rest of the way home and sometimes he has to walk the entire twenty-two miles between Reardan and his home.

One day Junior arrives home to find that his sister has married a Flathead Indian from another Reservation and has moved to Montana. Mary apparently met the man at the casino and told her mother that she wanted to spend her life with someone who wasn't afraid to gamble. Junior is upset at first. He says Indian families stick together and his sister's action takes her away from the family unit. However, he thinks about it for awhile and realizes she's set out to live her dream. With that thought, he's pleased for her.

Mary's bravery makes Junior come up with a plan. The following day he walks up to Gordy and suggests they be friends. Junior and Gordy begin talking and Junior reveals



that he loves cartoons. He says it's probably crazy but Gordy says if Junior is good at it, it's not crazy. Junior says Gordy challenges him in ways no one else does. Gordy points out that books are like towns: Even the smallest town has mysteries. That is true of Reardan and of the Reservation town where Junior lives, Wellpinit.

Pages 74 through 98 Analysis

Junior's confession about Dawn seems completely out of context until the reader pays attention to the sentence in which Junior admits to always falling for girls who were out of his league. With regard to Dawn, he notes that she is the best traditional powwow dancer on the Reservation and that he didn't have a chance of catching her attention. Junior has already become enamored with Penelope at Reardan and it's evident that he's comparing his love for Dawn with his emerging crush on Penelope.

Junior is jumped by a group of guys after he raises some money on Halloween and they kick him a few times and take his money. Junior is upset at the situation but he's more upset at the thought that one of the guys who attacked him might be Rowdy.

Junior draws a picture about his trip to school on an average week. On Monday, there's no money for gas and Junior hitchhikes to school. On Tuesday, there's money for gas but the car isn't running. On Wednesday, the car breaks down a mile from school and Junior has to walk the rest of the way. On Thursday, his mom takes him to school because his dad is too hung over. On Friday, there's no gas money and no one gives him a ride, meaning he walks the entire twenty-two miles. The fact that Junior is going to such lengths to get to and from school is a statement of his dedication to this goal.



Pages 99 through 129

Pages 99 through 129 Summary

In "My Sister Sends Me an E-mail," Junior recounts the email from Mary. She says she loves Montana, has ridden a horse for the first time, and has not yet found a job. She says she and her husband had their honeymoon at a hotel at Flathead Lake and that there was a phone in the bathroom. She says she is happy and loves her life.

In "Thanksgiving," Junior draws a cartoon in which he and Rowdy are superheroes bumping fists. He goes to Rowdy's house to give it to him but Rowdy's father insists Rowdy isn't home. Junior leaves the cartoon and turns back to see Rowdy near a window. Rowdy makes an obscene gesture but doesn't tear up the cartoon. Junior takes that as a sign Rowdy still has some respect for Junior.

In "Hunger Pains," Junior is headed to class when he hears a horrible sound from the girls' bathroom. He knocks on the door and Penelope emerges chewing gum and obviously trying to cover the smell of vomit. When she asks what Junior is looking at, he says, "an anorexic," but she says she's bulimic. Junior tells her not to give up and she's suddenly crying out her troubles to him, telling him that she's expected to be fun and popular all the time and never allowed to be scared, which makes her more scared. Junior and Penelope are suddenly friends and students at Reardan make note of their budding friendship. Junior says it's not a romantic connection but is more like "friends with potential." Penelope's father is racist and hates Junior. He says that Penelope is only dating Junior in order to make her father mad.

Junior notes that everyone looks at him a little differently because of his connection with Penelope. Other girls become interested and he's popular. Junior says he doesn't know anything about love, but he knows about beauty and Penelope is beautiful.

In "Rowdy Gives Me Advice About Love," Junior sends Rowdy an e-mail. He says he's in love with a white girl and asks what he should do about it. Rowdy responds quickly, saying that he's tired of Indians who act as if a white girlfriend is something to flaunt, like a bowling trophy. Junior asks Gordy what he should do and Gordy does some research. Gordy cites an article in which a writer said people care more about pretty white girls than any other group of people. He says his conclusion is that Junior is as big a racist as everyone else.

In "Dance, Dance, Dance," Junior says he's half white when he's home and half Indian when he's at school. Junior says his parents are working hard to scrape up money for gas to get him to and from school, for some new clothes occasionally, and lunch money. He says he manages to keep the fact that his family lives in poverty a secret. He says the majority of whites believe the Indians are wealthy because of the casino and government handouts. The fact is the casino is losing money and there are no handouts. The time for the Winter Formal rolls around and Junior knows Penelope will



go with someone, so he asks her to go with him. Knowing he doesn't have a ride or money, he arranges to meet her at the gym.

Junior has to wear his father's suit to the dance and he expects the worst but Penelope immediately expresses her delight, referring to the suit as "retroactive." Junior expects to walk Penelope to the parking lot after the dance where her father would be waiting but some of the group decide they want to go to Spokane for pancakes. Junior has five dollars in his pocket and knows he's doomed.

At the pancake house, Junior reveals to Roger that he forgot his wallet at home. Roger hands him forty dollars. Later, Penelope asks Junior if he's poor. Junior finally admits that he is and reveals that he sometimes has to walk the entire distance home. Penelope begins to cry for him. Junior says that it's amazing how wonderful people can be once he allows them into his life.

Pages 99 through 129 Analysis

Junior asks Penelope what the difference is between being anorexic and bulimic. Penelope says an anorexic is anorexic all the time but "I'm only bulimic when I'm throwing up." Junior doesn't get the logic and compares it to his father who claims to only be an alcoholic when he's drunk. The truth is that Penelope is struggling and there's a connection between Junior and Penelope because of this struggle.

Penelope may be dating Junior because he's an Indian and isn't fully accepted when she begins liking him. Junior says she wants to do something out of the ordinary and that dating him fits that bill. It could also be that Junior challenges Penelope in ways her popular friends would never dare. For example, he asks what she wants to do with her life and she presents him with impossible dreams, such as traveling the world. He insists that she get serious and tell him, simply, what she wants. She reveals that she wants to be an architect. When he insists she tell him why, she says she wants to build something beautiful so she'll be remembered. This is probably not the kind of revelation she'd make to most of her friends who expect her to remain in character all the time.

Penelope's father, Earl, is angry that Junior is dating his daughter but seems determined not to forbid it, probably realizing it would only make Penelope more determined. At one point Earl threatens Junior if he makes passes at Penelope. At another point, he says that he'll disown Penelope if she turns up pregnant with a half-Indian child.



pages 130 through 149

pages 130 through 149 Summary

In "Don't Trust Your Computer," Junior is missing Rowdy so e-mails Rowdy a photo of his smiling face. A few minutes later, Rowdy e-mails back a photo of his bare butt. Gordy asks about the photo and Junior reveals that Rowdy had been his best friend but is now angry at him. Gordy asks why and Junior says many people on the Reservation call him "apple," indicating he's red on the outside and white on the inside. In other words, a traitor.

In "My Sister Writes Me a Letter," Junior gets a letter from Mary. She says she's still looking for a job but no one will hire her because she doesn't have enough experience. She wonders how she can get experience if no one will give her a job. She sends a photo of her new "house," which is really a trailer. She says it's the most beautiful house in the world.

In "Reindeer Games," Junior decides there's no need to try out for the Reardan basketball team. His father asks if Junior knows how Arnold and Agnes met. Arnold says he was five, his mother was thirteen, and that she helped him get a drink from a water fountain. Arnold says the moral of the story is that a person has to "dream big to get big." Junior takes his father's advice. There are forty kids trying out for the team. There is room for twelve kids on the varsity team and twelve on junior varsity. Junior expects to be selected for the "c" team. Junior is put against Roger in a full-court one-on-one game. He is shoved down almost immediately but comes back, makes a long shot and rushes against Roger to snag another shot. Junior is selected for the varsity team and the first game is against Wellpinit, the Reservation team for which Rowdy plays.

Junior is nervous and might have skipped the game except that he sees his parents and grandmother in the stands. He notes they are willing to put up with the torment they'll be given by being in the stands to cheer for Junior's team, and that prompts him to face his fear and take the court to play. However, as soon as he's on the court, someone throws a quarter and hits Junior in the forehead. His forehead starts to bleed and he's taken out of the game. Eugene, who is an EMT for the tribe, arrives in the locker room to check Junior's injury. He says it will take about three stitches and offers to drive Junior to Spokane. Junior refuses the offer, instead asking Eugene to sew it up himself. Eugene agrees and Junior, no longer bleeding, is back in the game.

The game is going well until Junior goes in for a shot and Rowdy smashes into his head, knocking him unconscious. Junior and his parents head for Spokane in the ambulance and there's a near riot on the court. The referees are afraid there is going to be a complete riot so they call a series of technical fouls against Reardan, handing Wellpinit ten free throws. Agnes worries that the concussion will further injure Junior's brain and he admits to being worried about that as well, but the doctors say he's fine. Junior's coach arrives and says he feels very guilty that Junior has been injured. Junior



says he wanted to play and the coach admires his dedication. When Coach finds out Junior isn't supposed to sleep at all that night because of the concussion, he stays and they spend the night telling stories to each other.

pages 130 through 149 Analysis

Junior notes that the Wellpinit team turns their backs on Junior, a sign of disrespect. He says that if they had been that well organized when he was attending school there, he might never have left. His classmates see, for the first time, a bit of what Junior is enduring in order to attend school at Reardan.

Rowdy's anger at playing against Junior is understandable. He still feels betrayed by Junior, whom he considers his best friend. Rowdy's actions, however, are not understandable at all. Rowdy knows about Junior's brain surgery as an infant and that Junior could be severely damaged or even die if he's hit in a specific place on the head. Rowdy had worried about that in the past and that is the first thing he asked Junior after Junior had been jumped by the men at the powwow. It seems Rowdy is set on inflicting pain and he doesn't care how dangerous his actions are.

The scene in which Coach stays up all night with Junior is interesting. The coach feels guilty because of Junior's injuries. He says he realizes the animosity and should have cancelled the game with Wellpinit, but it's unlikely he understood the full level of animosity they were facing. When Coach realizes Junior is supposed to stay awake, he spends the night taking with Junior. Junior says they tell many stories to each other, but he doesn't reveal any of them. In a diary in which he relates almost everything, this is skipped. He says only that the night belongs to him and Coach.



Pages 150 through 196

Pages 150 through 196 Summary

In "Valentine Heart," Junior gives Penelope a homemade Valentine and Penelope says she forgot it was Valentine's Day. A few days later, Eugene and his friend Bobby are drinking together and apparently fight over the last drink in a bottle. Bobby shoots Eugene in the face, killing him. Bobby is so drunk he doesn't remember pulling the trigger. Bobby is so ridden with guilt when he realizes what he's done that he hangs himself.

Junior misses a lot of school over the coming weeks. His cartoon depicts some of the reasons including the grieving family, the lack of money for gas, and his mother's need to keep him close. Junior's friends realize the reason he misses so much school during this time but one teacher, Mrs. Jeremy, welcomes him as a new student, snidely pointing out that he shouldn't be missing so much school. Junior wants to stand up to the teacher but can't find the strength. Gordy stands and drops his book with a loud noise. Penelope follows suit as does the rest of the class. Then they all walk out. Junior later makes lists of things that make him happy.

In "In Like a Lion," Junior becomes more proficient on the basketball court and his coach says he might make all-state teams and could even be called on to play for a small college. Junior is interviewed by a television station interested in the story of an Indian kid who's attending school at Reardan and facing his former teammates on the court. But he doesn't want to share his feelings and keeps giving the interviewer grief. Finally, the interviewer says they'd thought the story was important and makes Junior feel bad so that he responds with his true feelings, including his need to prove himself and the fact that he's facing Rowdy, who used to be his best friend. The interviewer promises to be watching Junior during the game.

Coach announces that Junior will be starting. Junior is assigned to guard Rowdy. As the ball is put into play, Rowdy grabs the ball and makes a run for the basket. Junior considers fouling him just to make sure he doesn't make a dunk in the opening play but doesn't. Instead, he grabs for the ball and takes it out of Rowdy's hands. Junior then makes the run back toward his own basket. Rowdy is right behind him and when Junior jumps for the shot, Rowdy soars up as well. But Junior's jump is really a fake and Rowdy rushes past Junior as he takes a second to stick out his tongue at Rowdy then makes the three-point shot. Junior says there's pandemonium in the stands and the score is only three to nothing. But he also points out that the game is already over. That play sets the tone for the entire game and Reardan wins by forty points.

As the teams line up after the final buzzer, Junior is swept up in the emotion of the win. Then he looks over at the Wellpinit team and suddenly feels ashamed of how much he'd wanted that win. He knows that some of those players hadn't eaten breakfast that morning because there was no food in the house. Others lived with alcoholic parents, a



father hooked on drugs, or had a father in prison. He also knows Rowdy's father will probably beat him for the loss. And Junior knows that not one of them is looking forward to college. Junior feels so ashamed of his earlier desire for revenge that he rushes to the bathroom and throws up. Then he cries and the coach and his teammates believe they're tears of joy. The season wraps up with Wellpinit eliminated from the playoffs and Reardan knocked out of the playoffs with a last second shot by the opposing team. Junior says the entire team and the coach cries in the locker room following that upset.

Pages 150 through 196 Analysis

The situation with Christmas is heartbreaking. Junior gets nothing for Christmas and seems to expect that would be the case. He says having no money for presents is a typical thing. But Arnold's reaction is to run away and get drunk, remain drunk for days and days, and return with an apology. Junior tells his father it's okay but he admits to himself that it isn't. The effect of alcohol is among the themes of this book and it's seen clearly in this scene. Arnold feels badly that he can't buy Junior presents for Christmas so takes the meager amount of money the family has and goes to get drunk. The fact that Arnold has saved a five-dollar bill is important and Junior realizes it. Junior knows that five dollars would have bought a cheap bottle of whiskey for his father, prolonging the drunk for at least a few more hours. His father obviously fought hard to save that five dollars. Junior calls it a "beautiful and ugly thing."

Junior is greatly upset by Eugene's death coming on the heels of his Grandmother's. He says he doesn't know how much death and loss he's supposed to endure. Junior says he's angry at God and at alcohol.



Pages 197 through 213

Pages 197 through 213 Summary

In "Rowdy and I Have a Serious Discussion about Basketball," Junior e-mails Rowdy, apologizing for beating them. Rowdy returns with an e-mail promising to win over Reardan the following year and calls Junior a name. Junior responds that the name might be correct but that he's still on the team that beat Rowdy. Junior says the e-mail might not sound positive but that it's the first time he and Rowdy have been friendly in ages and he's happy with the situation.

In "Because Russian Guys Are Not Always Geniuses," Junior says he is fourteen years old and has attended forty-two funerals. Junior says that's many more than the white kids and that the majority of the deaths on the Indian Reservation are directly related to alcohol. Junior says it may sound like he's being overly bitter but that he has a reason. While sitting in chemistry one morning, the Reardan guidance counselor, Miss Warran, asks to speak to Junior. The chemistry teacher, Dr. Noble, isn't happy about the interruption but Miss Warren insists. Once in the hall, Junior discovers Miss Warren is crying and she reveals that Mary has "passed away." She says Junior's mother called with the news and that Arnold is on his way to pick up Junior. Junior insists on knowing how Mary died but Miss Warren continues to say only that Arnold is on his way. Junior finally gives in and realizes he'll have to wait until his father arrives. Miss Warren encourages Junior to wait in her office but he insists that he'll wait outside despite the snow and despite Miss Warren's objections.

While he waits, Junior begins to have nightmares about his father and fears that Arnold might have a wreck on the way to pick him up. When Arnold arrives, Junior begins laughing hysterically and can't stop. Arnold says that Mary and her husband had a party in their trailer and drank a lot. They passed out in the bedroom and someone, who was also drunk, tried to cook some soup on a hotplate. A fire started and the trailer was destroyed. Mary and her husband died inside. Arnold says the police believe Mary and her husband never woke up. Junior realizes his father is trying to comfort him with that piece of information but doesn't find it comforting that his sister was so drunk that she burned to death without waking.

Junior is hysterically laughing on the way home but then falls asleep, literally in the middle of his laughter. He draws a cartoon of his father driving while he's laughing. In that cartoon, his father says, "Son, you're freaking me out now." Junior sleeps the rest of the way home and dreams about a school picnic and eating cantaloupe. When they arrive home, Junior asks if Mary is really dead. Arnold confirms that she is and Junior says he'd hoped he'd dreamed it. As they get out of the car, Arnold tells Junior, "I love you." Junior notes that his father hardly ever says those words.

Inside the house, Agnes is curled into a ball on the couch and there are "twenty-five or thirty cousins, all eating our food." Agnes pulls Junior close and makes him promise he'll



never leave her. He realizes her pain and does make the promise. Then she slaps him and makes him promise that he'll never drink, which he also does. They huddle together while Agnes cries.

Two days later, Mary's body arrives and the funeral is held. Junior notes that as the coffin settles onto the dirt at the bottom of the hole, there's this sound that reminds him of a sigh. Junior can't take the pain and takes off at a run. He intends to run deep into the woods but instead runs into Rowdy, knocking them both to the ground. Junior is amazed to see that Rowdy is crying. They argue over whether Rowdy is really crying then Rowdy throws a punch but misses. The argument escalates and Rowdy says Junior's decision to turn his back on his tribe caused Mary's death. Junior is struck by that idea and realizes Rowdy is right. Then Rowdy runs away and Junior is struck by the fact that Rowdy never cries and never runs away from anything.

The next morning, Junior gets ready to go to school in order to escape the pall hanging over his house. There, he's greeted by people who are worried about him and want to find a way to help him with his pain.

Pages 197 through 213 Analysis

Junior's initial reaction to the news of Mary's death is denial. When Miss Warren says Mary is "gone," Junior tries to ignore the statement by saying that he already knows that Mary has "gone" to Montana to live. He continues to argue in this vein until Miss Warren says Mary is dead. Junior says there's simply no arguing with the word dead. Junior's questions turn to how Mary died and Miss Warren obviously knows but is reluctant to tell him. Junior doesn't understand that Miss Warren, in her capacity as guidance counselor to the white kids at Reardan, isn't accustomed to delivering news of dead siblings. It's news Junior has obviously seen so often that he can't imagine Miss Warren's discomfort.

Junior describes the drive home and says he is crying so hard that he throws up a little and can taste cantaloupe, even though he hasn't eaten any. Junior then remembers that Mary loved cantaloupe and puts it down to "weird."

Junior says the relatives and friends who are gathered at his house are seeking a way to honor the deaths of a young couple who died in a fire because of a drunken party. The natural reaction for the Indians is to get drunk as well. Junior says being drunk doesn't make any of them happy. Junior sees the effects of alcohol much more clearly than most.

Junior's willingness to accept Rowdy's explanation of Mary's death is seen in the closing pages of the chapter titled "Because Russian Guys Are Not Always Geniuses." There's a cartoon that depicts Mary and her husband, surrounded by flames while her trailer burns in the background. Mary is saying, "Thanks a lot, Junior."



pages 214 through 230

pages 214 through 230 Summary

In "My Final Freshman Year Report Card," Junior draws a cartoon of his report card. He makes a B in geology and wood shop and A's in all his other classes.

In "Remembering," Junior and his parents spend a day at the cemetery, caring for the graves of Eugene, Mary, and Grandmother. Agnes packs a lunch and Arnold brings his saxophone. Arnold does some serious thinking that day. He knows more of his Indian tribe members will die over the coming year and that many of them will die because of alcohol. He also knows he's set out to escape the Reservation and that his life will be lonely because of that, but that he would have died on the Reservation if he hadn't taken that step. He thinks about Mary and is pleased that she set out to realize her dream. He says he wishes he could find Rowdy and beg his forgiveness for leaving the Reservation. The chapter concludes with a cartoon of Junior and Rowdy, holding hands as they jump into Turtle Lake when they had been in third grade.

In "Talking About Turtles," Junior remembers spending time with Rowdy when they had been friends. Junior recalls a discussion they'd had in which Rowdy announced his plans to have air conditioning in every room of his house when he became a famous basketball star. The two had traded insults and complained about the heat, then decided to go swimming in Turtle Lake. There's a legend about the lake and Junior is certain they shouldn't swim in it, but knows they will anyway. Near the lake is a huge pine tree and Rowdy suggests they climb it. Junior believes they'll die if they do and Rowdy agrees it's a possibility, but they set out to climb anyway. Junior says the top of the tree is at the bottom of the sky. The branches become thinner as they climb and the tree begins to sway. They talk about how pretty the view is from the top of that tree.

Looking back, Junior says he can't believe they survived that climb but he also can't believe he survived his first year at Reardan. Junior is missing his white friends and thinking about Penelope when Rowdy knocks on his door and walks in. Junior says he thought Rowdy was mad at him. Rowdy says he is, but that he's bored. They decide to play basketball for awhile. At one point, Junior asks Rowdy where he plans to attend school the coming year and Rowdy says he'll continue to go to Wellpinit. Junior suggests, again, that Rowdy could transfer to Reardan. Rowdy says he'd come across the word "nomadic" recently and looked it up to discover it referred to a people who travel. Rowdy says he's always known he would remain on the Reservation but that Junior would be the one who is nomadic. Junior is moved by the thought and cries. Rowdy says Junior had better always remember to send him postcards, no matter where he is. Junior asks if they'll always know each other and Rowdy says there's no way of knowing. The two continue to play basketball, one-on-one, until the moon is high in the sky but they don't keep score.



pages 214 through 230 Analysis

Junior comes to understand Mary better after she leaves than he probably had while she was living in his house. Junior knows that Mary had dreamed of being a writer of romance novels and had moved to Montana in an effort to realize that dream. At one point, she tells Junior that she intends to complete her book before summer but she dies before then.

As the book comes to a close, Rowdy reveals that he's always known Junior would leave the Reservation. He uses the word "nomadic" to describe what Junior is doing. It seems reasonable that Rowdy really has always held to the theory that Junior would leave, making Rowdy's reaction when Junior does leave more understandable.

There's symbolism in the game of basketball Rowdy and Junior play as the book comes to a close. The boys have been teammates and rivals on the basketball court. The fact that they play against each other now for hours but don't keep score indicates their truce.



Characters

Arnold Spirit, Junior

Known by most people on the Reservation as "Junior," he is an Indian who is torn by his desire to achieve more than most Indians on the Reservation. Junior was born with a birth defect that he describes as water on the brain. Doctors predicted he wouldn't survive or would be severely retarded, but he escaped both predictions. He has handicaps, including eye problems and a lisp, that make him the brunt of jokes among his peers on the Reservation. He turns to cartoons as a means of expressing himself when he's unable to talk to other people. His cartoons indicate a great deal about how he sees himself and this is seen clearly in one of the early cartoons of the book in which he is screaming, "love me." Junior is, in many ways, an optimist. He has seen more than his share of death and anger but continues to believe that he could have a better life. He sees leaving the reservation as a means toward that end. He leaves the Reservation school to attend a school that is predominantly white. Junior struggles to figure out life off the Reservation. He doesn't understand the culture but is determined to learn and move toward his ultimate goal of escaping the poverty of the Reservation. The death of Junior's grandmother and then his sister hit him hard. He is furious when someone tells the family that his sister never woke from her drunken stupor as she succumbed to the fire that killed her. Junior says knowing his sister was that drunk at her death isn't a comfort.

Rowdy

Junior's best friend. Rowdy, is an Indian who sees Junior's decision to leave the Reservation as an act of betrayal. Rowdy is just a couple of hours younger than Junior. Junior says that he was born broken and Rowdy was born mad, and that not much has changed since their births. Rowdy is an athlete but not good at academics. He is extremely loyal to Junior though he's torn by Junior's decision to attend Reardan. When Rowdy and Junior attend a powwow and Junior is beaten up by three grown men, Rowdy steps in to get revenge. He catches the three in a drunken stupor and shaves off their eyebrows and cuts off their braids. Junior depends on Rowdy for companionship and is hurt when Rowdy won't attend Reardan with him but also won't support Junior's decision to attend there. Rowdy later reveals that he's always known Junior would eventually leave the Reservation in search of a better life. He makes Junior promise that he'll always send post cards, regardless of where he roams.

Arnold Spirit, Senior

Arnold Spirit, Senior is Junior's father. He does many things correctly for Junior but fails at being a father, husband and provider. Junior's dad is an alcoholic and often disappears for days at a time while leaving the family on their own. Arnold is a gifted



musician and Junior believes he could have made a living with his music if circumstances had been different.

Agnes Adams Spirit

Agnes Adams Spirit is Junior's mother. She tries to be a good mother to Junior but can't provide many things for him. When her daughter dies, she clings to Junior for hours while she cries and he realizes her need to hold onto him. Mrs. Spirit is intelligent and buys books by the pound, remembering everything she reads. Junior knows she dreamed of going to college but didn't have the opportunity.

Penelope

A girl who attends Reardan High School, she is popular and eventually befriends Junior. Penelope is struggling with the pressure of being popular and Junior discovers she's bulimic. Junior believes that Penelope is dating him, at least partly, because he's not popular and dating him is daring.

Mary

Mary is Junior's older sister. She has a dream of being a writer but never seems to be any closer to achieving that dream. She spends most of her time in the basement of the family's home until she marries and moves to Montana. She is living in Montana with her husband when their trailer catches fire. She and her husband are drunk and don't wake in time to escape the fire.

Gordy

A very smart kid at Reardan High School, he stands up for Junior when Junior explains how petrified wood is formed. Gordy challenges Junior throughout his high school career and encourages him to learn things for himself.

Grandmother

Junior's Grandmother, she is immediately supportive of his plan to attend the white school. She dies and Junior says her death leaves a huge hole in the family.

Eugene

Arnold Spirit's best friend, Eugene, is killed by gunshot to the face. Junior notes that deaths of this type are common on the Reservation and that alcohol is responsible for almost all deaths.



Roger

A student at Reardan, Roger is a popular boy who makes fun of Junior then becomes Junior's friend. When Junior has no money for a meal out, Roger gives him forty dollars and, from that point, figures out that Junior is poor.



Objects/Places

The Spokane Indian Reservation

Land set aside for Indians, the Spokane Indian Reservation is seen as a hopeless place by many.

Kentucky Fried Chicken

Kentucky Fried Chicken is the restaurant Junior says makes the chicken with which his parents will eventually arrive after the family has been without food.

Oscar

Junior's "best friend," Oscar is a dog that dies early in the book.

Sacred Heart Hospital

Junior and Rowdy were born on the same day at Sacred Heart Hospital.

Reardan High School

Most of the white children attend classes at Reardan High School.

Wellpinit

Wellpinit is the town where Junior lives on the Indian Reservation.

Flathead Lake

Mary spends her honeymoon with her husband at Flathead Lake.

The Winter Formal

The dance at Reardan that Junior attends with Penelope is The Winter Formal.

Spokane

Junior and the others go to Spokane for pancakes after the dance.

Apple

Apple is the term some people use for Indians who are traitors, or red on the outside and white on the inside.



Themes

The Effects of Alcohol

Junior's family is devastated by the effects of alcohol and it's apparent that he realizes alcohol to be the cause. His grandmother is killed by a drunk driver. Arnold's best friend Eugene is shot in the face by a friend when the two men are apparently arguing over the last drink in a bottle. The friend is so drunk he doesn't realize what he's done for days and when he does, he kills himself. Perhaps the most tragic example of the devastation is seen in the death of Junior's sister, Mary. Mary leaves the Reservation in search of dreams of her own. Junior is proud of her for taking that step and even prouder when Mary announces her plans to finish a book by summer. But Mary and her husband host a party at which there is a lot of drinking. Arnold says he isn't at all surprised because alcohol and parties are such an inherent part of their culture. But someone tries to use the hot plate and sets the trailer on fire. The part of the tragedy that strikes Arnold most is that his sister was too drunk to even try to save herself. He says he knows that is supposed to be a comfort - that she didn't suffer - but he finds it simply tragic that she was that drunk. Junior watches in the days after Mary's death as dozens of relatives gather and they all seem to pay tribute to Mary and her young husband by drinking. To a lesser degree, the effects of alcohol are seen in Junior's everyday life. He says that he sometimes can't get a ride to or from school because his father is too hung over to drive him. His father goes on a week-long drinking binge before Christmas and the family has no gifts. The effects of alcohol are not limited to Arnold's home. Rowdy is beaten by his father on a regular basis, usually while his father is drunk.

Cultural Differences

Arnold Spirit, Junior, leaves the Reservation to attend a school where a vast majority of the students are white. It's a daring move because he's trying to bridge two cultures and neither fully understands the other. One piece of evidence about the differences of the cultures is seen with how other students refer to Arnold, Junior. On the Reservation, he's known as Junior, probably because his father is known as Arnold. In the white school, he's called Arnold. This is one symbol of the differences of the cultures. For the sake of clarity in this study guide, Arnold Spirit, Junior, is referred to as "Junior" and his father is referred to as "Arnold." Junior also doesn't understand the rules of standing up for oneself at Reardan. At the Reservation school, fights are a common occurrence, happening whenever there's a slight or wrong, or even a perceived slight. Children of those slighted tend to fight as well. In Reardan, Junior accepts the racist remarks for a period of time but eventually faces one he can't ignore. He strikes out and hits the boy who made the remark. Junior expects to be pummeled by the larger boy but is surprised when the boy seems as if his feelings are hurt and declines to finish the fight. Another important aspect of the cultural differences is seen in the fact that whites believe the Indians have plenty of money. Junior says most believe the casinos are racking in



money for the Indian people and that government handouts are frequent and generous. In fact, neither is true.

The Desire to do Better for Oneself

Junior is looking forward to learning new things in high school, especially geometry. When he discovers the book he's been given is the same book used years earlier by his mother, he's furious. Junior throws the book, striking a teacher and setting the wheels in motion for his move to another school. When the teacher suggests Junior move to another school where he'll have more opportunities, Junior is initially skeptical. But once he begins to think the plan will work, he presents it to his parents who are thoroughly in agreement. Junior and his parents know he'll face adversity, not only from the people at the white school where he wants to attend, but also from the Indians who will take Junior's decision as the act of a traitor. Both scenarios happen though it takes less time for the whites to accept Junior than for the Indians to accept his actions. Junior says he never really expected opposition from his parents. His father is an alcoholic, his mother is a former alcoholic, and the family is struggling in the depths of poverty, but his parents want better for Junior. They see an education as a means toward that end. Junior wants his best friend, Rowdy, to take that step as well but Rowdy isn't willing. It could be at least partly because going to the Reardan High School takes a great deal of courage. Arnold's friend Eugene recognizes it as does Arnold, Agnes, and Grandmother. Rowdy probably recognizes it as well though he never says so. What he does say is that he's always known Junior would be the one to step away from the Reservation in his quest to better himself.

To a lesser degree, Mary is another example of this theme. Mary wants to be an author though she keeps her dreams secret from most people.

Style

Point of View

The story is presented in first person and is limited to Junior's perspective. The limited perspective means the reader has no idea what's going on in the minds of others until Junior discovers those facts for himself. This is seen, for example, when Rowdy reacts violently at Junior's decision to leave the Reservation to attend school at Reardan. Rowdy is furious and it's only much later in the book that he reveals he'd always known that Junior would be the one to leave. Another example of the limitation is seen in Junior's understanding of his sister, Mary. Junior doesn't realize that Mary has a dream of writing romance novels until his teacher reveals this. The reader also doesn't get this information until Junior does. Because the story is presented as a diary, the limited perspective is appropriate. The fact that the story is so greatly limited is what the reader would expect of a diary. Junior seems brutally honest about his life and the weaknesses of his family, his friends, and himself. For example, he reveals that his father is an alcoholic who disappears for a week at Christmas because he is ashamed that he has no money for Christmas presents. However, the fact that he seems honest doesn't necessarily mean that he is completely truthful. The natural tendency of people is to hide things of which they are ashamed. It could be that Junior is keeping some details to himself, despite the fact that he seems honest.

Setting

The story is set in Washington State and there are several distinct settings in the book. Those include Junior's home, the Wellpinit High School and Wellpinit gym, the Reardan High School and Reardan gym, and several minor settings such as his father's car, the football stadium, and the cemetery. The majority of the settings are described in adequate detail though much is left to the imagination. Junior's house is small and has a basement. There are dramatic differences between the Wellpinit High School and the Reardan High School. Those differences are based mainly on the wealth of Reardan and the lack of wealth at Wellpinit. Both Wellpinit and Reardan appear to be real towns in Washington State. It should be noted that the author, Sherman Alexie, has reportedly based the story loosely on his own life and that he lives in Spokane, Washington. The fact that the places are real lends some credence to the story. The real settings tend to lend credence to the cultural differences. The fact that Wellpinit and Reardan are only twenty-two miles apart in distance becomes a moot point when the reader sees the dramatic cultural differences in the two schools. The cultural differences become as important as the physical setting. The story and cartoons are copyrighted 2007 and it seems reasonable the story is set in that time period. The technology available, including cell phones, seems to support that as a time setting.



Language and Meaning

The story is written in a fairly straight-forward style. A reader with an average vocabulary will likely find only a few words with which he is not familiar. An important detail about this book is that there are sexual references and swear words used in several of the chapters. Junior and Rowdy share insults in which they accuse each other of being gay, though they use very derogatory terms. It seems reasonable that the two boys in this time frame and this setting would trade these kinds of insults so the writing seems in keeping with the topic. However, some readers may find the references offensive. The references do not appear in every scene but are frequent enough to be a distraction to readers who are offended. The use of cartoons is an important part of the story line and the reader who skips over the cartoons will miss a great deal about the story. Junior's view of himself and his family are prime examples of this. Junior draws a picture of himself in which he is half white and half Indian. The white half wants to look like his class mates with an ergonomically correct backpack, fashionable clothes and shoes. The Indian half is wearing cheap jeans, a t-shirt from a discount chain store, and using a trash bag for a book bag. Junior draws similar portraits of Mary, his grandmother, and his parents.

Structure

The book is divided between narrative, dialogue, and drawings. The cartoons are an integral part of the story. In some cases, the cartoons are used to supplement the story being told. In other cases, the cartoons themselves provide storylines. This is seen when Junior's classmates come to realize he's poor. Junior doesn't talk much about the extent of his efforts to keep his family's financial situation from his classmates, though he says he knows it will catch up with him. But the cartoon includes five ways he pretends not to be poor. One is to say he's not hungry when he has no lunch money and another is to pretend to be sick when there is a school event or field trip. When there's a bake sale, he pretends Native Americans don't eat sugar and can always rely on the excuse that there's an Indian ceremony going on to avoid any other situation that requires money.

The book is divided into thirty-one chapters. The titles are "The Black-Eye-of-the-Month Club;" "Why Chicken Means so Much to Me;" "Revenge Is My Middle Name;" "Because Geometry Is Not a Country Somewhere Near France;" "Hope Against Hope;" "Go Means Go;" "Rowdy Sings the Blues;" "How to Fight Monsters;" "Grandmother Gives Me Some Advice;" "Tears of a Clown;" "Halloween;" "Slouching Toward Thanksgiving;" "My Sister Sends Me an Email;" "Thanksgiving;" "Hunger Pains;" "Rowdy Gives Me Advice About Love;" "Dance, Dance, Dance;" "Don't Trust Your Computer;" "My Sister Sends Me a Letter;" "Reindeer Games;" "And a Partridge in a Pear Tree;" "Red Versus White;" "Wake;" "Valentine Heart;" "In Like a Lion;" "Rowdy and I Have a Long and Serious Discussion About Basketball;" "Because Russian Guys Are Not Always Geniuses;" "My Final Freshman Year Report Card;" "Remembering;" and "Talking About Turtles." The chapters are of widely varying lengths. For example, the title chaptered



"My Final Freshman Year Report Card" is a single page and consists only of a drawing of Arnold's report card. The chapter titled "Because Russian Guys Are Not Always Geniuses" is sixteen pages in length and includes several drawings. The chapter titles lend a clue about the contents of that chapter. For example, the chapter titled "Wake" is about the wake held for Junior's grandmother. The titles are not numbered. The story is presented roughly in chronological order but there is an important flashback near the end of the book. In that scene, Junior recalls a time when he and Rowdy had climbed a tree.



Quotes

"I get headaches because my eyes are, like, enemies, you know, like they used to be married to each other but now hate each other's guts. And I started wearing glasses when I was three, so I ran around the rez looking like a three-year-old grandpa." Page 3

"He was the loser Indian father of a loser Indian son living in a world built for winners." Page 55

"Of course, since I was allergic to pretty much every plant that grew on earth, I would have been a real Indian with a head full of snot." Page 58

"At school today, I went dressed as a homeless dude. It was a pretty easy costume for me. There's not much difference between my good and bad clothes, so I pretty much look half-homeless anyway." Page 77

"Man, that takes courage and imagination. Well, it also takes some degree of mental illness, too, but I was suddenly happy for her." Page 90

"And Indian boys weren't supposed to dream like that. And white girls from small towns weren't supposed to dream big, either." Page 112

"The Reardan kids were so worried about grades and and THEIR FUTURES that they sometimes acted like repressed middle-aged business dudes with cell phones stuck in their small intestines." Page 130

"I know, I know, but some Indians think you have to act white to make your life better. Some Indians think you become white if you try to make your life better, if you become successful." Page 131

"We'd lost my grandmother and Eugene. How much loss were we supposed to endure?" Page 171

"I hoped and prayed that they would someday forgive me for leaving them. I hoped and prayed that I would someday forgive myself for leaving them." Page 230



Topics for Discussion

Describe Arnold Spirit, Junior. What kind of person is he? What are his dreams and what does he want from life? What is he willing to do to reach these goals? What are some of the milestones he accomplishes during this book?

Who are Junior's parents? Who are the other members of his family described in this book? What are the strengths of his various family members? What are their weaknesses?

Who is Rowdy? Why does Junior say he and Rowdy are closer than he and any member of his family? What kind of person is Rowdy? What happens to affect their friendship during the story? How does each boy change over the course of the story? Why does each boy change?

Who is Eugene? What is his role in the story? What is his role in Junior becoming accepted at Reardan? What does he say about Junior's decision to attend Reardan? What is Eugene's fate? How does it affect Junior and his family?

Who is Penelope? What is the issue that plagues her? How does she try to explain it away? What kind of person is she? How does she become friends with Junior? What are Penelope's dreams? Why?

Describe the two ball games in which Rowdy and Junior meet on the court as opponents for their high school teams. What are Junior's attitudes during and after each of the games? Compare those attitudes to Junior's attitudes during the game of one-on-one he and Rowdy play at home.

What is the most important theme seen in this story? What is the most important setting? Who, other than Junior, do you consider to be the most important character?