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The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie, Art by Ellen Forney, Little, Brown and Co. 2007

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Reviewed by Dan Barden

To call Alexie our greatest contemporary Native American writer is sort of like calling Lance Armstrong our greatest contemporary Texan American cyclist. It tells you something, but mostly it misses the point. Alexie is one of our greatest American writers, and last year’s National Book Award for this Young Adult novel makes that fact even harder to ignore.

It’s the story of Junior, a very-much-like-Alexie-himself Native American teenager growing up on the reservation and longing to become a cartoonist. Junior decides - in a heartbeat - that he will leave his much-loved but vastly problematic rez for an all white high school. Accompanied by Forney’s cartoons, the book is bittersweet, deeply-felt, and laugh-out-loud funny. The fact that it’s a YA novel shouldn’t be off-putting to anyone but an actual teenager who doesn’t want to confront the substance of daily life. Each character is both lovely and benighted. The book climaxes with a basketball game between the reservation and Junior’s new school. A nail-biter worthy of Hoosiers, the battle points up all the ambiguities of life in 21st century America.

The story never feels like a dispatch from an exotic corner of American culture. It’s about American culture. Ultimately, it’s the story of an American teenager, in all his glory and goofiness. If I found this book in the ethnic literature section of the bookstore, I would pull it down and move it to the front of the store. Probably, I wouldn’t make it that far; I’d put it in the hands of the first reader I found.

- Dan Barden is an associate professor of English at Butler University