

## A brave life

The real struggles of a Native American boy make an uplifting story, writes Diane Samuels

*Diane Samuels*

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**T**he title tells it like it is. Sherman Alexie was born a Spokane Indian. He grew up where the book is set, on a reservation - the "rez" - in Wellpinit, Washington state. He was, like his central character, hydrocephalic at birth, "with too much grease inside my skull". And in his teens he attended Reardan High School, off the reservation, near the rich farm town, where all the other students were white. Many authors hum and ha when asked if their fiction is in any way autobiographical. This one makes no bones about it and yet skilfully manages to transform his actual experience into a novel. True fiction. Absolutely.

Arnold Spirit Jnr, known simply as Junior on the rez, speaks directly to the reader and is both narrator and illustrator, a cartoonist. He feels like rubbish, gets beaten up as a matter of course because he lisps, stutters and looks like a freak, but with a pen in his hand he finds a sense of being "important". He can at least express what it's like living his life. For example, he describes on one page how it "sucks to be poor", and on the next sketches portraits of his parents as they might have been if someone had paid attention to their dreams. His could-have-been mother is smart in her suit, a community college teacher. His another-life father is hip, a professional saxophonist. He doesn't draw what they actually are. He just uses a couple of words for that. She is an ex-drunk. He is a drunk. In fact Junior only knows five Indians who have never drunk alcohol, one of them being his bandana-wearing grandmother: "Drinking would shut down my seeing and my hearing and my feeling."

Junior might have brain damage from surgery and seizures but he is following in grandmother's footsteps, engaged with the world, full of anger and energy. Too full. When he sees his mother's name in a geometry textbook in class, he just cannot bear that his generation are still studying from the same books as the last. There is a graphic illustration of boy throwing a book at his white teacher and breaking his nose. Suspension follows. But then the wounded teacher comes to visit. He isn't happy about Junior's assault but he's also brimful of guilt, as his job has been to educate their culture out of his Indian students. And he has some advice for Junior: "You have to take your hope and go somewhere where other people have hope." And the most hope belongs to white people. So Junior makes the bold decision to leave his home turf and go to Reardan. No matter that he has to walk more than 20 miles to get there each day because there isn't enough money for gas.

He finds friendship with a geek, Rowdy, who teaches him the art of reading. He gets to be the semi-boyfriend of the beautiful, milky Penelope, who wears her bulimia like a badge of honour. Even the jocks learn to respect him, especially when he emerges as a whizz on the basketball court. The only problem is that the league schedule inevitably includes on-court battles against the team from his old school, whose star player used to be his best friend, who sees him as a

traitor. And so he must be warrior enough to face his people and defeat them. In his own words, this is "really weird".

Some books are like living organisms. They seem to breathe, laugh, weep, joke, confront, meet you eye to eye. Maybe it's the combination of drawings, pithy turns of phrase, candour, tragedy, despair and hope that makes this more than an entertaining read, more than an engaging story about a North American Indian kid who makes it out of a poor, dead-end background without losing his connection with who he is and where he's from. The writing occasionally relies too heavily on the cartoonish quip, but mostly it is muscular and snappy with a knack for capturing the detail and overview with wrenching spareness. One chapter is a gem of love and heartbreak. "And a Partridge in a Pear Tree" covers barely two pages and yet it evokes so much as it describes Junior's dad's return from a drunken binge over the holiday period, then the offer to his son of a five-dollar bill scrunched in his boot: "Man that thing smelled like booze and fear and failure." Opening this book is like meeting a friend you'd never make in your actual life and being given a piece of his world, inner and outer. It's humane, authentic and, most of all, it speaks.

• Diane Samuels's plays include *Kindertransport* and *The True-Life Fiction of Mata Hari*

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