

Race and identity:
'the absolutely true
diary of a part-time
indian' and 'monster...'



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Young Adult literature covers a wide variety of genres and subjects, covering topics that a vast majority of young adults are struggling with day to day. These novels are not limited to race or gender; however, minority characters are hard to come by and still underrepresented. It is not a secret that most protagonists represent white or white culture. But minority representation is important in today's society because more and more teens are experiencing racism and oppression or struggles because of their race. Minority representation is important because those teens need to read strong, developing characters that are the same skin color as them and the same culture that runs deep. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and *Monster* are two novels that represent minority teens dealing with the struggles of identity and everyday life but in a unique way that only an African American and a Native American could understand, but easily appreciated by anyone.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian was written by Sherman Alexie in 2007 and reflects the tough decisions of a Native American teenager, Ju who lives in poverty on his reservation in Wellpinit as he moves to the nearby wealthy, white school of Rearden. Junior, the protagonist, is already at a disadvantage as he suffers from "hydrocephalus" which affects his size, eyesight, speech, and he suffers from seizures. Because of his condition, he is already the target of bullying on his reservation on top of the poverty stricken life that he is enraged with. Upon moving to Rearden, he realizes that he is the only Indian besides the mascot, ironically. So before Junior moved, the mascot of an all white school was an Indian. This situation is how the author includes "cultural appropriation" into the novel and we

can see that it makes Junior uncomfortable. Socially speaking, an all white school should not have an Indian mascot in the same way that an all Native American school would not have a white person as their mascot. But, white culture is dominating and sees no problem in this. For Junior though, it is a constant reminder how white people see his people and his culture, and it takes away from their struggle as Native American people who had to fight for their land.

As the novel progresses, Junior begins fitting in with his new school and friends, but Rowdy, Junior's old best friend resents this and the reservation quickly turns on Junior. When reflecting on his pull between Wellpinit and Reardan Junior's internal struggle begins to manifest when he realizes, "[t]raveling between Reardan and Wellpinit, between the little white town and the reservation, I always felt like a stranger. I was half Indian in one place and half white in the other. It was like being Indian was my job, but it was only a part-time job. And it didn't pay well at all" (Alexie, 118). This quote is important because Junior is revealing to readers that no matter where he goes he feels that he doesn't fit in. His heritage is becoming more of a "job" and less of his own identity. Another example of this dilemma is during the basketball games. Of course Wellpinit and Rearden would play each other, but Junior never thought he would have to play against his own best friend. On the day of the game, Junior's uneasiness comes through as he comments "The morning of the game, I'd woken up in my rez house, so my dad could drive me the twenty-two miles to Reardan, so I could get on the team bus for the ride back to the reservation" (Alexie, 142). Here we see Junior's guilt in the fact that his dad has to drive him to Rearden just so he

can load up and come back to Wellpinit. Even though Junior has nothing to be guilty of except trying to better himself and eventually pull his family out of poverty. This is inconvenient for Junior and if he lived a “ normal” life he wouldn't have to deal with the struggles of race and identity. But Junior finds the silver lining in both of his situations. He realizes that due to his heritage, his family ties are much stronger than that of white culture and he appreciates this. On the other hand, Junior learns that it is okay to try and better your own situation and there are people who will always oppose, but it has to be done anyway. Had Junior not broken this cycle and moved schools, he would still be stuck in poor living conditions with poor education conditions and no way out of his cycle.

Another novel, *Monster*, by Walter Dean Myers is about Steve, a 16 year old African American waiting on trial for attempted robbery and murder. Being one of the four men who were accused, only he and James will be tried, the other two have entered a plea agreement. In the beginning, the prosecutor calls Steven and the others “ monsters,” which is a pretty hefty statement to lay on a group of teenagers. This comment most likely stemmed from the fact that all four boys are non-white and most likely would not have happened had they been Caucasian. This is just one of many instances where the color of Steve's skin would result in bias and disbelief. “ Nothing is happening that speaks to you being innocent. Half of those jurors, no matter what they said when we questioned them, believed you were guilty the moment they laid eyes on you. You're young, you're black, and you're on trial. What else do they need to know?” (Myers, 78-79). Here we see Steve's defense attorney, Kathy O'Brien, who is skeptical of Steve's innocence to

begin with, break down the corruptness of the justice system. She is warning Steve that those people don't see "innocent until proven guilty" they see guilty automatically. The jury is predicted to see the color of Steve's skin and automatically decide his fate. In other words, being black makes him automatically guilty and no one on the jury is going to see through to that. O'Brien herself creates a racial profile against Steve because as it stands in the novel, he was only the lookout and yes he was guilty by association, but he is only a 16 year old boy who we know is incapable of murder. However, as she questions his innocence we see Steve struggle as he truly has no one that would back him up 100%, except for his film club mentor, George Sawicki. When Sawicki takes the stand to give a testimony to Steve's character he ensures them that Steve is incapable of murder and proudly defends his morals. Before this, the jury and prosecutors saw Steve as a "monster" which further dehumanized him and made it easier for the jury to decide that Steve was guilty. However, Sawicki's testimony purifies those thoughts and elevates Steve back to his rightful place as a human with thoughts and feelings. Without his testimony, Steve would have most likely been found guilty and sentenced and his story would have stopped there. But because a teacher or mentor spoke up on Steve's behalf he was set free to rethink his actions and be given the second chance that he deserved.

Often times "white privilege" is given and taken for granted. We don't know the struggles that minorities go through and we don't know what it is like to be wrongly judged just by the color of our skin. Reading these novels gives insight into the struggles that non-white people groups deal with on a daily basis and how we can stop this division from happening. For Junior, none of

his new schoolmates knew how much he was sacrificing culturally speaking and how much hate he was receiving back home just so he could be given better opportunities. Sometimes we are just handed these “ better opportunities” and we don't see the effort of someone as a minority that has struggled to obtain these opportunities because of their skin color. Literature like these novels and others are so important to today's culture because racism and cultural appropriation is still occurring to this day. For Steve, he was almost all too readily placed in prison because of the color of his skin. He had to fight for his proper chance to be heard and even then, his lawyer refused to hug him and left Steve wondering if she did see him as a “ monster.” Teenagers should not have to endure this type of hate and racism, and there should be books and literature representing these teenagers so they have a voice and a vision for the future, something that should be rewarded to all of us regardless of skin color.

Work Cited

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