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Northwest novel removed from Richland schools' reading list

By Jacques von Lunen, Tri-City Herald

Students in Richland school classes won't read an award-winning book by a Northwest author in the foreseeable future.

The Richland School Board voted 3-2 this week to prohibit use of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie in classrooms of any grade level.

The book had been piloted in a ninth-grade English class last fall and then was reviewed by the district's Instructional Materials Committee.

The original question before the board was whether to use *Absolutely True* in freshman classes. But the final vote took it away from all students.

None of the board members had read *Absolutely True*, they conceded.

The book is based on Alexie's own upbringing on the Spokane reservation and his leaving "the rez" to go to school in nearby Reardan, a predominantly white farming town.

In the book, Alexie's alter ego is shunned by his old friends and neighbors and bullied by his new classmates. The 14-year-old protagonist struggles with poverty, racism and death.

Alexie uses some profanity and other potentially offensive language to describe those situations in the National Book Award winner, which has earned him challenges from schools and libraries.

The novel landed on last year's Most Challenged list by the American Library Association.

But the Richland High teacher who used the book in his ninth-grade class deemed its language to be balanced by the book's worthy message.

"I especially liked the book because of its realism in describing the high school experience and its overwhelming message of perseverance," Jim Deatherage

wrote in a letter to parents, which was included in the information presented to board members.

Also included were the reviews of students and parents. Although Deatherage encouraged all parents to read the book and comment on it in writing, only one did so. That parent did not recommend the book for the class.

Students supported it, although a few acknowledged that some readers might be offended by sections of it.

"It really sounded like it was in the head of a 14-year-old," wrote one student. That student recommended the book with reservations, because "some kids haven't reached that maturity level."

The materials committee was divided on the book. A little more than 40 percent recommended it wholeheartedly. The rest were evenly split between opposing it and recommending it with reservations.

But the board's discussion quickly turned from allowing this particular book in a ninth-grade classroom to the purpose of language arts classes.

"I get the feeling that language arts is an opportunity to talk about these issues and problems that are rampant in our society," said board member Phyllis Strickler. "But is that really (its) purpose?"

Literature used in schools ought to teach high values and character, Strickler said. "I don't see the appropriateness of gratuitous language and descriptions of sex," she said.

Literature can fill several functions in the classroom, said board president Richard Jansons. One is to turn students into better writers and readers, he said.

"Another is exploring these kinds of issues that may be appropriate for some and not for others," Jansons said.

Several members of the district's instructional materials committee argued against using the novel in ninth grade, but said it would be fine in any grade above that.

"I would agree with that," Jansons said. Other board members also expressed their concern about the novel's use in freshman classes, but said they would

approve it for 10th grade or above.

But when Strickler made her motion for a vote, she asked that the book not be used in any language arts class, in any grade.

Jansons and Heather Cleary voted against that proposal. But Strickler, Rick Donahoe and Mary Guay voted to keep the book out of all Richland classrooms.

Donahoe and Guay face challengers connected to recent Richland book controversies in the upcoming board election, but both assured the Herald that this did not affect their vote.

That vote was timely, as the book's author just last week traded blows with a reviewer on the website of the Wall Street Journal about its being appropriate for young teenagers.

The reviewer, Meghan Cox Gurdon, had included *Absolutely True* in a list of young adult books that "reflect back hideously distorted portrayals of what life is."

Not so, countered Alexie a few days ago in the same publication.

"I write books for teenagers because I vividly remember what it felt like to be a teen facing everyday and epic dangers," Alexie wrote. "I don't write to protect them. It's far too late for that."