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Multimodal Young Adult Fiction and Reading Motivation

An analysis of Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* and their possible influence on reading motivation among young male readers.

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Abstract

The following thesis investigates two young-adult novels, Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007) and Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), in light of how they can enhance reading motivation among young male readers in lower secondary school. By looking at previous studies on boys' reading habits and their reading preferences, this thesis demonstrates how Alexie and Haddon's novels can encourage reading motivation with focus on multimodality, the protagonist's gender, humor, and genre. Furthermore, this thesis also discusses the novels' relevance in connection to the interdisciplinary topics *health and life skills* and *democracy and citizenship* from the Norwegian LK20 curriculum for the English subject.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	II
Acknowledgments.....	III
1 Introduction.....	1
1.1 Theory on motivation and adapted education.....	1
1.2 Previous studies on boys' reading habits and motivational factors	4
1.3 Multimodality	6
1.4 LK20's core elements and interdisciplinary topics.....	9
2 The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian.....	11
2.1 The novel's multimodality and reading motivation.....	12
2.2 The protagonist's gender and reading motivation	17
2.3 The novel's topics and reading motivation.....	21
2.4 Crude humor and reading motivation	23
3 The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time.....	27
3.1 The novel's multimodality and reading motivation.....	28
3.2 The murder mystery genre and reading motivation.....	32
3.3 Christopher's disability and reading motivation.....	36
Conclusion	43
Works Cited	45

1 Introduction

This thesis examines young boys' reading habits in lower secondary school and different factors that can enhance reading motivation. In this thesis I am going to present previous studies on boys' reading habits and analyze two young-adult multimodal novels, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007) by Sherman Alexie and Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003). My intention is to analyze how the multimodality and other aspects of these novels, such as humor and genre, can increase reading motivation among young boys. When researching boys' reading habits I quickly discovered that boys in particular struggle with reading motivation. This urged me to investigate exactly what boys prefer to read and other important factors that can influence reading motivation. Previous studies suggest that boys prefer to read novels and other fictional texts with male protagonists as it is less challenging for them to identify themselves with these characters (Roe 25). Additionally, factors such as the visual elements in multimodal texts, i.e. illustrations accompanying text, is found to act as a motivating factor for boys when it comes to reading motivation, making them read more books, encounter new words, and explore new worlds (Jaffe & Hurwich 12). I believe that Alexie and Haddon's novels can motivate young boys to read more due to the fact that they carry multimodal characteristics and other important factors boys tend to be attracted to when reading. At the same time, these novels can be used as a tool to teach students the interdisciplinary topics "health and life skills" and "democracy and citizenship" from the Norwegian LK20 curriculum for the English subject. When the young male readers are motivated to read literature, it is possible that the interdisciplinary topics can be taught to them more easily.

1.1 Theory on motivation and adapted education

As previous studies disclose, young male readers struggle with reading motivation (Carlsen 211-212, Jensen et al. 7). In order to understand why this is the case, it is important to discuss what motivation is. Motivation can be seen as a situational state of mind that is affected by expectations, values, experiences, and self-assessment (Skaalvik & Skaalvik 139). As I will discuss more later on, boys' have shown a tendency of being less motivated to read than girls (Carlsen 212). Therefore, if one considers the different factors that affects motivation, it is possible for the teacher to aid and facilitate boys' reading motivation. Vigdis Refsdahl argues that knowledge about motivation is particularly important when trying to help students who

have previous experiences of defeat or failure in connection to reading (55). Hence, it is important that teachers incorporate *adapted education* where possible. Adapted education is a fundamental principle in the Norwegian Education Act and states that “Education must be adapted to the abilities and aptitudes of the individual pupil, apprentice, candidate for certificate of practice and training candidate.” (Opplæringslova). Furthermore, Håstein and Werner argue that adapted education can be seen in connection with inclusion and affiliation (20-22). Students that do not receive education that is adapted to their prerequisite for learning can experience lack of confidence and a larger chance of the student avoiding similar tasks in order to prevent future letdowns when reading (Skaalvik & Skaalvik 146). The feeling of being included within the classroom can also be experienced as stronger when adapted education is applied. It is therefore possible that adapted education can help with boys’ motivation issues concerning reading, as adapted education can increase their feeling of inclusion while their current abilities are being considered. The educator should then pay attention to boys’ interests outside of the classroom in order to apply readings that will appeal to their interests.

Even though adapted education can help with boy’s reading motivation, it is important to disclose how different aspects of motivation can influence the young male reader. Of course, it is also important to establish the fact that not every young male reader is the same, however, it is possible that theories on motivation can give some insight on how one should approach the problem of lack of reading motivation among young males. Among the many theories on motivation, Deci and Ryan (2000) introduced the theory of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (qtd. in Skaalvik & Skaalvik 151). Skaalvik and Skaalvik present Deci and Ryan’s motivation theory in their book *Skolen som læringsarena* (The school as a learning arena). Within this theory, Deci and Ryan separate between amotivation, extrinsic- and intrinsic motivation. *Amotivation* can be seen as a state of mind where a student has no intention of performing a specific task. This type of motivation is often a cause of students not seeing the value of the activity, does not think that the activity will lead to a wanted result, or has no wish in accomplishing the activity. The lack of self-efficacy and not seeing the value of the activity is strongly evident within amotivation (Skaalvik & Skaalvik 151). In connection with reading motivation, this type of motivation can possibly be identified within groups of boys who has not been introduced to novels that speak to their interests. Lack of adapted education can also influence boy readers to feel amotivation towards reading: the male reader could have been given novels that are above or below their level of reading comprehension in the past, which ultimately gives the reader the experience of reading as challenging or not stimulating enough.

Despite the possibility of some boys feeling amotivation towards reading, Gavigan argues that the reluctant readers potentially are competent readers. They are perceived as reluctant and lacking motivation due to a “mismatch between their own interests and school literary practices” (Gavigan 16).

Extrinsic motivation is evident when students perform activities that does not appeal to their interests or satisfaction. Within extrinsic motivation, Deci and Ryan distinguish between *controlled extrinsic motivation* and *autonomous extrinsic motivation*. Controlled extrinsic motivation involves a form of pressure to perform an activity, often accompanied with the feeling of not having a choice. Autonomous extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is similar to intrinsic motivation. This type of motivation illustrates that the student performed an activity because he is able to see the value of the activity, and not because he necessarily enjoys the activity (Skaalvik & Skaalvik 151-52). An example of extrinsic motivation can be found in boys who read because they are able to see the value of reading the assigned text, possibly because they feel pressured to read for assessment purposes. Extrinsically motivated boy readers should be praised, however, the ideal situation would be to intrinsically motivate boys to read. When boys are intrinsically motivated to read, they represent self-determined activities. This means that the student reads due to interests or because the activity of reading brings joy and/or satisfaction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik 151). It is therefore important that boys are given the right and suitable novels that will appeal to their interests and previous experiences of reading. When their interests are recognized in the classroom, they ultimately become more intrinsically motivated to read (Gavigan 14). This is where adapted education plays an important role.

Adapted education and motivation go hand in hand, and how the educator teaches is crucial for the students' opportunity to learn. However, as Håstein and Werner write, adapted education is only possible if the students respond well to the educator's teaching (36). It is therefore important that the students are given learning material that will motivate them. Ideally, students, and specifically boys, should become more intrinsically motivated by reading multimodal fiction, as it had been proven to be a motivating factor. Another factor that has been proven to motivate boys to read are the gender of the main character(s) in the novel. This will be further investigated later on in chapters discussing the chosen novels for this thesis.

1.2 Previous studies on boys' reading habits and motivational factors

In order to understand how the educator can enhance reading motivation among young male readers, it is necessary to look at students of both genders' reading habits. Compared to earlier PISA studies, the most recent PISA study from 2018, highlights some crucial information on students' reading habits. This study found that half of the participating students in Norway do not read outside the classroom and in their spare time. The proportion of students claiming that they do not read for enjoyment, such as fiction and magazines, is larger than ever before (Jensen et al. 1). Furthermore, a greater proportion of participating students report that they do not read at all or only when they are "forced" to (Carlsen 211; Jensen et al. 1.), in other words, extrinsically motivated. Through my own experience as a teacher, I have seen the lack of motivation to read for enjoyment up close. One particular experience stuck with me. I was a substitute teacher in English for some 9th grade students at a lower secondary school and the students were reading, to my surprise, Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*. While reading, the students were asked to answer questions alongside each chapter. This prompted me to do some investigation while the students were working with the novel. I walked around asking them what they thought about the novel and the supplementary tasks. Some students answered that they enjoyed the novel and found the questions helpful but somewhat interrupting in the reading process. Other students did not enjoy the novel because they had to do tasks alongside while reading. This got me thinking about how the teachers of the English subject often assign reading literature with tasks, which might create the sense of reading only for one purpose: assessment, meaning that the students are extrinsically motivated for the reading activity. Of course, it is important to assign tasks in order to map out their level of reading comprehension. This is called *quantitative mapping* (Refsahl 66). However, when assigning students to read literature, it is important to carefully think about the obligatory workload connected to the reading activities. As Carlsen argues, too much obligatory work when reading literature, will be counterproductive in the mission to make students read for pleasure and outside of the classroom (213). This can lead to the feeling of controlled extrinsic motivation, when the main goal is to lead the students toward intrinsic motivation, making them want to read for their own pleasure. Therefore, the big question concerns how to facilitate motivation without creating the sense of reading for the purpose of assessment.

The PISA study also points out another noteworthy fact about reading habits and performance. Compared to other OECD countries participating in the PISA studies, the

participating students from Norway illustrate a significant gender gap between boys and girls. Boys have not scored higher than girls in any PISA test to date concerning reading (Carlsen 211-12; Jensen et al. 7). This is particularly clear in context of Norway, which inspired me to scrutinize this problem more closely. Does this gender gap have anything to do with motivation? Or are there other factors that play a bigger role concerning this gender gap in reading? However, even though there exist differences between the genders when it comes to reading habits, researchers have identified a notable exception to this tendency. Namely, boys who spend a lot of time playing video games have a tendency to perform much better when reading in English than reading in Norwegian (Carlsen 212). The reason as to why boys perform better when reading in English can also be explained through their enjoyment in playing video games, as they most often are exposed to video games in English. This can further be explained in connection with other findings in PISA studies from 2000-2009 and national tests for 8th graders from 2007-2011. These studies and tests found that boys in general scored just as good, and sometimes better than girls with tasks involving multimodal texts, such as maps, graphs, diagrams, and tables. They did, however, find texts characterized by analysis and discussions more challenging than girls. The only exceptions were texts characterized by war and heroes, where boys performed exceptionally well (Roe 25). These findings are interesting, and can suggest that gaming and multimodal texts can be seen in connection with each other. Both gaming and multimodal texts involves visual characteristics, which are found to be an appealing factor for boys when reading (Gavigan 34). Indeed, the PISA studies demonstrate that boys who read multimodal fiction score higher in reading tests. However, the following question is how do we make them read?

Other than multimodal texts, research shows that the gender gap also is evident when looking at boys' and girls' reading habits when reading fiction in particular. PISA tests highlight that boys prefer to read about fictional characters that they easily can identify themselves with. Girls, on the other hand, manages more often to relate and identify with a broader character pool outside of their own gender and age group (Carlsen 212; Roe 25). When the texts contain girls and/or adults as the main character, boys tend to perform worse than girls compared with texts with boys as the main character (Roe 25). *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* both focus on the experiences of young male characters, which make them suitable novels for analysis and investigation of the tendency of boys preferring male protagonists in novels. Furthermore, in the PISA studies, the participating students were also asked about their reading habits. The studies illustrate that girls

tend to have a broader field of interest when it comes to reading. At the same time, girls tend to do more extensive reading (Roe 25). As Carlsen discusses, students who read literature on a weekly basis score better on overall texts and comprehension (212). This is an important factor that partly explains why girls score overall better on PISA tests regarding reading. Compared to girls, boys tend to have a more goal- and facts oriented approach when reading. These results are illustrated in the PISA study conducted in 2009, where 63 percent of boys agreed with the statement “I only read to get the information I need”, while only 37 percent of girls agreed with this statement (Roe 26). This demonstrates that boys are more controlled extrinsically motivated to read than girls, which is in line with Carlsen’s argument. He argues that motivation is a more significant factor for boys than girls: girls perform on average well regardless of the reading task, while the boys’ scores are significantly higher if the reading task succeeds in motivating them (212).

To sum up everything that has been stated so far motivation seems to be the main issue regarding boys’ reading habits. Furthermore, reading with the purpose of assessment is possibly a disruptive factor when trying to motivate students, particularly boys, to read. However, as mentioned, extrinsically motivated male readers should still be praised as they do in fact read. Furthermore, boys prefer to read fiction attending to young male protagonists as this is a factor that makes it easier for them to identify themselves with the characters. Multimodal texts, such as maps, graphs, diagrams, and tables are proven to increase boys’ reading scores, making them perform better than girls at times. These actualities can facilitate motivation, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* are good examples of novels that both carry young male protagonists and the multimodal characteristics boys tend to find as a captivating factor when reading. However, before delving into the novels, it is important to demonstrate what multimodal texts are, and particularly what characteristics of a multimodal novel that might motivate young boys to read. In the next section, I will disclose a brief introduction to the characteristics of multimodal texts.

1.3 Multimodality

Multimodal texts and novels can be defined as texts that utilize “different *modes*, which include overarching systems of visual, audial and textual communication, and examples of modalities within these systems, to make meaning” (Rimmereide 192). The modes Rimmereide mentions can be categorized as sound, movement, maps, graphs, colors, hyperlinks, and

photos/illustrations. Each mode uses distinctive semiotic resources to make meaning, which is ways of communicating through symbols and signs. An example of this can be emojis or traffic lights, both being semiotic systems (Rimmereide 192) because they signalize meaning. When combining different semiotic systems, i.e. text and illustrations, the reader is required to employ in a reading process that involves processing two modes at the same time. This facilitates that the reader has to recognize the connection between the two modes (Rimmereide 192). *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* are multimodal novels that carry multimodal features, with illustrations playing a big role in the narration style and plot. This means that the novels' multimodality impacts the relation between the verbal- and the visual text. This specific relation is often referred to as *iconotex*, meaning that the reader must be able to interpret two semiotic sign systems, the verbal and the visual, separately. At the same time, the reader needs to recognize how these systems work together and influence each other (Rimmereide 198).

Multimodal novels can often be confused with graphic novels, which is understandable as they carry many of the same qualities as graphic novels. However, graphic novels are considered as *sequential art*, meaning that the visual elements in graphic novels happens in sequences. It is therefore important to highlight key differences between graphic novels and multimodal novels. Graphic novels are often recognized by the terms *panel*, *text* and *gutter* (Rimmereide 199). The panel is identified as the images or illustrations and institutes the main feature in the graphic novel. The panel is often further identified with *frames*, which are found around the panels. The frames are often very clear and distinct, however, sometimes these frames are blurrier and harder to identify. The text in graphic novels are primarily identified within speech bubbles and/or narrative captions, while the gutter is everything but the panels and text: often the gap or space between panels (Rimmereide 199). The chosen multimodal novels for this thesis cannot be considered as sequential art because it does not happen in sequences, rather it is primarily text with an illustration (panels) on every other page. The frames are blurry and even sometimes non-existing, however, many of the illustrations use speech bubbles and/or narrative captions. Due to this, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* are to be considered as multimodal novels and not graphic novels. Nevertheless, as they contain illustrations, the novels are important to investigate in terms of reading motivation. The illustrations are beneficial for many struggling and inexperienced readers because they provide pauses in the reading process. The content of the text is often one of the main difficulties for struggling

readers and the illustrations will help readers visualize the content of the text (Carlsen 217). At the same time, the use of paired text and illustrations often makes it less challenging for readers to recognize and understand developing themes, key ideas, and details. These illustrations also aid comprehension and memory as people tend to process visual content faster than verbal content. Besides, illustrations also have the tendency of making the content more accessible and meaningful (Jaffe & Hurwich 5, 12) for struggling and reluctant readers.

In terms of how we process visual and verbal content, Scott McCloud discusses that illustrations are received information, meaning that the reader does not need formal education to understand its message due to the fact that the message is instantaneous. Verbal content, on the other hand, is perceived information. This means that it takes time and particular knowledge to recognize the abstract symbols of language (qtd. in Jaffe & Hurwich 12). Even though some researchers advocate for the use of multimodal novels in terms of them aiding meaning-making, Wolfgang Hallet highlights some challenges with the use of multimodal novels. Hallet emphasizes that multimodal novels change the act of reading significantly. When reading traditional word-based novels, the reader is required to only decipher letters and sentences, while reading a multimodal novel requires more from the reader (Hallet 292). Hallet further argues that multimodal novels turn the text into a hypertextual composition, meaning that the reader must shift their attention between pages of verbal content and other modes, such as illustrations, that needs interpretation. This means that the reader has to decode every single mode, including verbal content, simultaneously, in order to understand the whole narrative (Hallet 292). In order to prepare students for multimodal reading, the teacher must train students to “read” and interpret multimodal features (cartoons, illustrations, pictures etc.) in the same manner one would read the verbal content (Hallet 293). It is therefore important to consider this when introducing multimodal novels in the classroom. With that being said, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* are great examples of novels to be used when introducing multimodal novels in the classroom. They demonstrate how the verbal and visual content work together to create meaning. Moreover, implementing these multimodal novels in the English classroom can advance students of both genders ability to create meaning of their own and other cultures and worlds. The implementation of these multimodal novels can also lead to increasing verbal skills, self-expression, self-image, confidence, independence, and most importantly motivation (Jaffe & Hurwich 13). These factors are in strong connection with the Norwegian interdisciplinary topics

health and life skills, and democracy and citizenship. The basis of these interdisciplinary topics will be discussed in the next section.

1.4 LK20's core elements and interdisciplinary topics

Seeing that reading motivation among young male readers is proven to be a problem, disclosing a brief introduction on the Norwegian curriculum objectives concerning reading is required in order to understand why reading motivation should be given more attention. Reading literature has been emphasized in both the old and the new curriculums for the English subject. The old curriculum objectives in LK06 emphasized reading in English as a basic skill that should teach the students to create meaning from different types of texts and to understand, reflect, and acquire insight and knowledge across different cultures and fields. (Utdanningsdirektoratet, *ENG-I-03*). The new curriculum from 2020, LK20, also emphasizes reading in English, however, it places a stronger emphasis on the cultural benefits of reading as well (Carlsen 210). Among the core elements of LK20 for the English subject, *Encounters with texts in English*, is especially worth noting as it gives great insight to what the students are supposed learn through reading in English. According to this core element, reading in English should give students experience with and knowledge about cultural and linguistic diversity (Utdanningsdirektoratet, *ENG01-04*). Furthermore, this core element claims that reading in English could help students to develop awareness about “different ways of life, mind-sets, and communication patterns,” (Carlsen 210). *Encounters with texts in English*'s description of reading in the English subject is closely connected to the development of intercultural competence (Carlsen 210). As Martha Nussbaum argues, reading literature plays an important role in developing a *sympathetic imagination*, meaning that fictional texts will challenge readers to scrutinize different identities and perspectives of life (qtd. in Carlsen 210). When reading, we develop a deeper understanding of people around us and of the society we live in. Reading literature gives students the opportunity to develop a more nuanced understanding of the society and the people living it. At the same time, students' language skills grow as well by being exposed to real-life language patterns (Carlsen 210). *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* are good examples for this approach on reading literature because they depict characters and stories that exhibit socially challenging identities and perspectives. At the same time, both novels reflect on different cultural settings, giving students the opportunity to explore new worlds and cultures, which is in line with LK20's values.

Within the English subject curriculum in LK20, the students are supposed to learn two different interdisciplinary topics. The first interdisciplinary topic is *health and life skills*, which is supposed to develop students' ability to express themselves in English both written and orally. More importantly, this interdisciplinary topic gives students new perspectives on different mindsets and communicational patterns, and others way of life and life situation. (Utdanningsdirektoratet, *ENG01-04*). As LK20 further argues, this interdisciplinary core value will teach students to handle situations which requires language and cultural competence better, which consequently can give students a sense of achievement and the development of a positive self-image and identity (Utdanningsdirektoratet, *ENG01-04*). The second interdisciplinary topic *democracy and citizenship*, develops students' understanding of their own perception of the world being culturally dependent. Learning English can open up the possibility of learning about different societies and cultures. Moreover, learning English also help students to understand that there exist different ways to understand the world. This understanding of the world can encourage curiosity and involvement, and contributes to prevent prejudices (Utdanningsdirektoratet, *ENG01-04*).

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* are two novels that can teach students the different aspects within the interdisciplinary topics. When the young male reader's motivation to read is enhanced, it can be easier to create discussions and encourage further thoughts that focuses on the interdisciplinary topics. Both novels portray diverse characters and storylines that highlight social and cultural differences in the world, exposing the young male reader to different life-situations and cultures. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* heavily discusses the issue of race and prejudices, identity, and cultural and social differences, which ultimately will teach and enlighten students about valuable lessons about these topics. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* exposes students to mental disabilities and different mindsets, which gives students the opportunity to develop their understanding of the world. Moreover, reading these novels develops students' vocabulary and ability to express themselves both written and orally in English because both novels illustrate various examples of real-life communicational patterns.

2 The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

Sherman Alexie's National Book Award winning young adult novel (Blasingame 69), *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), is a story written from the perspective of Alexie's persona, the fourteen-year-old Native American Arnold Spirit Jr., better known as Junior. Written in the form of a diary, the novel is partly autobiographical, as Junior's story is based on Alexie's own experiences ("The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian" 1). The story follows Junior and his troubling decision to transfer to Reardan High School, an all-white school. This decision leads to Junior being faced with numerous challenges concerning identity and race. As Jakobsen and Tønnessen observe, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* describes Native American communities in a "non-sentimental and nuanced way" (43), while on one hand depicting more common issues of personal growth (Garić 190), and on the other hand illuminating sensitive topics such as death, racism, identity, poverty and alcoholism. Alexie's choice of including such topics has led to the novel earning a spot on the list of banned books in the US libraries (Jakobsen & Tønnessen 43) for its controversial themes.

Despite being on the list of banned books, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* has charmed a wide range of audiences due to its effective use of multimodal elements and various themes (Garić 190) many people can resonate with. The novel's focus on Native American perspectives, Garić believes, is living proof that Native American reality and art are integral parts of today's American culture (190). Even more interestingly, as the novel's autobiographical echo strengthens the impact on social and cultural issues, Kramsch argues that the novel can "provide this imaginative leap that will enable learners to imagine cultures different from their own" (qtd. in Jakobsen & Tønnessen 43). *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* can therefore be seen as a novel with both historical and social contexts that can answer the questions of the interdisciplinary topics, democracy and citizenship and health and life skills, teaching the young male reader new perspectives on different ways of thinking and about different cultures.

Not only is *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* a great resource to use when incorporating LK20's interdisciplinary topics in the classroom, but the multimodality of the novel is also worth considering, especially concerning reading motivation among young male readers. However, it is not until recent years that multimodal literature has been accepted suitable for reading in school settings. Multimodal literature has been discredited and seen as a forbidden genre in schools. Luckily, multimodal literature is now more accepted and embraced,

and can often be found in school libraries (Farris et al. 181), helping young male readers to discover a love for reading. This is important because, as previously stated, multimodal features in texts are proven to encourage reading engagement, making male readers score sometimes better than girls in PISA studies (Roe 25). In line with this, it is in my belief that Alexie's novel can enhance reading motivation partly due to its use of vibrant, comical, and descriptive illustrations. Moreover, as the illustrations can appeal to young male readers, they also act as a scaffolding feature in the process of meaning making, possibly making it less challenging to understand the narrative. This can be seen in connection with how Junior's drawings reflect his moods and feelings. When Junior is feeling down or emotional, his cartoons are drawn in bolder lines, often more scribbled looking, while his cartoons are more detailed and softer when he feels calm (Jakobsen & Tønnessen 43). This creates opportunity to understand Junior on a deeper and more personal level, making it easier for the young male reader to identify and relate to him. Junior's cartoons convey meaning by themselves, "as well as in the multimodal ensemble of the book" (Jakobsen & Tønnessen 43).

2.1 The novel's multimodality and reading motivation

As previously discussed, young boys tend to perform better when reading texts with multimodal characteristics, such as graphs, diagrams, maps, and tables. In line with this, Gavigan argues that students of the 21st Century are largely influenced by advertising, television, and the Internet and are therefore to be considered as an extremely visual generation of multimedia learners (32). Because of the growing of a visual culture in today's young students, the visual elements in multimodal novels are more likely to foster engaged readers and make them more motivated to read more. In multimodal novels such as *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, illustrations blend with text, which can create a more non-threatening experience when reading (Gavigan 38). It is therefore possible to argue that multimodal novels will engage and motivate young boys to read more. As mentioned, multimodal literature is now more widely accepted by the public. As a result, graphic literature—such as Alexie's novel—is often a part of library collections with purpose of fostering boys' reading engagement (Farris et al. 181). *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is a suitable novel to use for the purpose of increasing reading motivation as it contains multimodal features being a novel encompassing both verbal and visual content. The novel is structured as a diary with first-person narration from the point of view of fourteen-year-old Arnold Spirit Jr, more commonly known as Junior.

Junior loves to draw cartoons, resulting in the novel being filled with his drawings. These drawings act as a supporting element to the text itself. For struggling and reluctant readers, this is an important factor as the illustrations creates a pause in the reading process (Carlsen 217), making the text less overwhelming. Furthermore, the multimodality of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* helps the reader to make meaning. The illustrations scaffold the textual meanings through “their rich visual modes of representation” (Chun 146). Junior himself argues why he finds drawings important:

I draw because words are too unpredictable.

I draw because words are too limited.

If you speak and write in English, or Spanish, or Chinese, or any other language, then only a certain percentage of human beings will get your meaning.

But when you draw a picture, everybody can understand it.

If you draw a cartoon of a flower, then every man, woman, and child in the world can look at it and say, “That’s a flower” (Alexie 5).

This passage from the novel highlights the importance of visual content. Junior argues that everybody can understand a picture, however, not everybody will understand certain words. When discussing why he draws with his friend Gordy, Junior says that he takes his drawings seriously. He uses the drawings as a mode for understanding the world, to make fun of the world, and honor his friends and family (Alexie 95). His statements about his drawings’ importance can be seen, as Jakobsen and Tønnessen argue, as reinforcing the drawings’ legitimacy in order to be taken more seriously (43). Furthermore, this passage also points to the possibility of Junior being a struggling and reluctant reader himself. In relation to earlier discussions on how the visual- and verbal content work together, the verbal content is often one of the major challenges for struggling and reluctant readers. When paired with visual content, such as illustrations, the visual content will help readers visualize the content of the text (Carlsen 217). Junior puts heavy emphasis on the importance of illustrations, demonstrating that he relies on the visual content when making meaning out of content. The possibility of Junior being a struggling and reluctant reader makes the probability of young male readers identifying with him stronger as they share this challenge together.

Even though drawings are important in the process of meaning making and seriousness, Junior's strong statements about his drawings can also be seen as ironic due to the novel being mostly presented in verbal content. However, the passage above can be further analyzed in connection with Junior's arguments about why he writes the way he writes: "I'm not even writing down this story the way I actually talk, because I'd have to fill it with stutters and lisps, and then you'd be wondering why you're reading a story written by *such a retard*" (Alexie 4). From this perspective, Junior uses his cartoons and drawings as a way to convey his story in ways words cannot reach. With drawings, Junior is able to demonstrate more precisely his thoughts and feelings towards people and situations in his life. When using a combination of both words and illustrations, Junior is able to appeal to the reader on more than one level, both verbal and visual, which contributes to the overall meaning of the story. Moreover, Junior also discusses how his drawings are important for him personally, describing them as his "tiny little lifeboats" (Alexie 6) and as a hopeful element for his future:

So I draw because I want to talk to the world. And I want the world to pay attention to me.

I feel important with a pen in my hand. I feel like I might grow up to be somebody important. An artist. Maybe a famous artist. Maybe a rich artist.

That's the only way I can become rich and famous.

Just take a look at the world. Almost all of the rich and famous brown people are artists. They're singers and actors and writers and dancers and directors and poets.

So I draw because I feel like it might be my only real chance to escape the reservation (Alexie 6).

When Junior explains why he finds his love for drawing cartoons as important, Junior demonstrates how he uses them as a tool to escape the harsh realities of his life. When he calls his cartoons his "lifeboats", Junior illustrates how the cartoons act as a life-saving feature in his life, making it possible to get through the day. This passage also points to the racial undertones in the novel. Based on Alexie's own experiences, the novel can be interpreted as a criticism towards the lack of hope Native Americans experience on the reservations and the lack of upward mobility from the reservation (Crandall 72). In this sense, Junior's hope is to be an artist in order to escape the reservation. Furthermore, Junior uses his cartoons in hopes of reaching

“a higher, universal level of communicativity, especially concerning the characterization of people in different environments, and the representation of his culturally divided self (Hallet 287). In this sense, Junior also uses his cartoons in order to reach a wider audience as well as allowing the reader to understand the cultural duality he experiences (“The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian” 3). In relation to the interdisciplinary topics, Junior’s Native American heritage can teach the young male reader new ways to interpret the world, giving the reader lessons on racial and cultural marginalization through Junior’s story.

Further consideration of Junior’s own statements emphasizes how words often *can* be too limited for some readers. Especially ELL students often encounter challenges when only reading text without accompanying visual content (Chun 146). Patricia Duff presented in a study concerning teaching comic books in school, that students found colorful illustrations, contextualized vocabulary, and interesting content as a motivating factor making them want to read more (qtd. in Chun 146). Indeed, the illustrations in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* are less colorful than the illustrations found in comic books, however, they do contextualize difficult vocabulary by using speech bubbles and narrative captions while maintaining interesting content that young boys often can relate to. In the beginning of the novel, Junior starts off by describing himself. Being born with “water on the brain” (Alexie 1), wearing lopsided glasses on a big head, and walking around looking like a capital *L* with enormous feet and hands, and a pencil body, Junior describes himself as “goofy on the outside,” (Alexie 3). The first illustration in the novel is a drawing of Junior, and it is not introduced until page five. This was possibly a conscious decision as it gives the reader the opportunity to create their own illusion of Junior’s appearance without being influenced by the illustration. The late introduced illustration of Junior scaffolds the reader’s own interpretation of him, which can be an important factor for readers that struggles with creating meaning out of verbal content alone.

Not only does the illustrations function as a tool for creating meaning, but it also appeals to the reader in the sense of creating a more enjoyable experience. A study conducted by Norton, readers of *Archie comics* stated that illustrations are “fun to look at” and were engaging while at the same time aided meaning-making and learning (qtd. in Gavigan 33). Furthermore, Karen W. Gavigan presented a study concerning struggling male readers participating in a graphic novel book club. She wanted to examine how four reluctant boys in eight-grade would respond to graphic novels. The participants’ comments revealed that their comprehension and reading motivation increased by particularly the illustrations in the novels (69). These previous studies argue that illustrations are an important factor when it comes to motivation. Male readers are

found to be more oriented towards visual/spatial learning and often respond positively to images and illustrations (Gavigan 34). It is therefore likely that the multimodality and the illustrations in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* will facilitate motivation to read as these elements actively keep the male reader interested.

Another important aspect to consider is how Junior's drawings are portrayed. With closer inspection, the different styles of his drawings can be seen in connection with the various events in the novel. In other words, his drawings are intentionally portrayed differently. In an interview with the illustrator of the novel, Ellen Forney explains how the drawings and their style are reflections of Junior's thoughts and feelings. The more scribbled-looking illustrations and comics demonstrate that Junior is quickly drawing his thoughts in an instantaneous way ("Interview with Ellen Forney" 240). It almost seems like Junior had an idea and quickly drew it, and these drawings are often portraits of himself. On the other hand, the more realistic drawings—i.e. the portraits of his friends and family—illustrate that Junior is more attentive and giving these drawings well-developed details. Forney argues that the penciled portraits describe intimate situations. These drawings are more detailed and realistic compared to the other drawings, which suggests that Junior has been concentrating and taken his time with the drawing ("Interview with Ellen Forney" 240). As Junior claims, one of the reasons he draws is to honor his friends and family (Alexie 95), which can be the reason as to why he spends more time on these drawings. The different styles of drawing demonstrate Junior's state of mind. Furthermore, they reflect his feelings toward certain situations and people in his life. As Forney further explains, Junior "depends on his cartoons to express himself, be understood, to escape, and to survive" ("Interview with Ellen Forney" 243). In this sense, Junior's drawings can be seen as very personal. The different kinds of drawings allow the reader a deeper peek inside Junior's mind. It can therefore be less challenging for the reader to understand Junior on a more personal level, which ultimately can facilitate reading motivation due to it being easier to relate to Junior. Moreover, Forney also did all of Junior's handwriting. She explains that handwritten text often carries more emotional power and charm. At the same time, handwritten text is more personal ("Interview with Ellen Forney" 244). Adrienne Kertzer argues that Forney's illustrations play a significant role in affecting the novel's tone. They do so by diminishing the violence and rage of Junior's narrative (69). In the novel, Junior states that he draws to express his anger and grief (Alexie 171, 178). After the death of his grandmother and his father's friend Eugene, Junior is mad at God and Jesus and felt like they were mocking him. He then proceeds by drawing a cartoon of Jesus standing on water looking angry while people point at him and

laugh. In the drawing Junior has written a narrative caption: “Jesus farteth and burpeth in harmony! MIRACULOUS!! John 11:35 am” (Alexie 171). Junior uses humor and irony when expressing his anger and grief. When doing so, Junior’s drawings and handwritten text gives the reader the sense of a more intimate reading experience: the drawing acts as a bridge between Junior’s state of mind and the reader. When the reader experiences this feeling, the relation to the character becomes stronger. This ultimately will lead to the reader relating more to the character which again can act as a motivating factor to read more.

In connection with the interdisciplinary topics, Junior’s drawings in the novel can be used to broaden the young male reader’s view of the world. Crandall argues that his drawings can be used as a tool to promote further conversations and understandings on how students identify others who are different from themselves, particularly people with disabilities (71). This means that the drawings display how Junior can be seen as different, especially considering his physical disability of being born with “water on the brain” (Alexie 1). His disability can teach the young male reader different perspectives of seeing the world.

2.2 The protagonist’s gender and reading motivation

Another important factor to consider when investigating how to motivate young boys to read is the importance of the identity of the main protagonist. It is not unfamiliar that boys prefer to read about characters that are similar to themselves. Virginia Wilson found that boys do not like to read “books about groups of girls” (Wilson 47). Furthermore, Bev Harrison argues that one of the most preventive factors in boys’ reading engagement is their narrow perspective of masculinity (47). This factor gives boys the idea that reading is considered as a “girly” and a feminine activity (Harrison 47; Farris et al. 180). Due to this perception, it is important to consider how to prevent further development of these ideas. As previously discussed, in order for young boys to feel a connection to the text, the identity of the main protagonist of a novel is crucial. If the protagonist is of the same gender and within the same age-group, male readers have a tendency to relate more to the novel (Carlsen 212). In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, the main protagonist, Junior, is a boy within the age-group a lot of teenage boys can identify themselves with. By presenting novels from the point-of-view of relatable boys, the sense of identity and representation in literature occur, which challenges the masculine perception of reading novels being “girly”. Considering if the novel was written from the point-of-view of a girl it would be more challenging for boys to relate and identify themselves with

the character. Being a coming-of-age story, Junior's story represents various topics and themes many young boys can relate to. As Carlsen writes, the success of a young-adult novel is depending on whether it succeeds to "describe the experiences and concerns of its reader in realistic terms, no matter whether the story plays out in recognizable or fantastical environments" (218-19). Junior's main concern in the novel is finding his identity, which is a typical theme not only boys, but girls as well, can relate to during adolescence. Furthermore, Junior's journey in finding his identity is recognizable for teenage boys in the sense of them being in the development of their own attitudes, values, and views on the world (Carlsen 219).

Junior's gender and age is highly reflected in the novel as it is written from his point-of-view. This is identified partly in Junior's language. His language can be characterized as how a young boy stereotypically would speak. The language is influenced by informal English and often short sentences. His sentences frequently start with informal slang words such as "Okay", "Yep", and, "Jeez" which creates the sense of a vernacular language that one would use when talking nonchalantly with a friend. Furthermore, slang is more common within the male vernacular language compared with the female vernacular language (Parkhurst 3). Howard B. Parkhurst further claims that accurate representation of male vernacular language facilitates young boys' ability to relate and identify with characters in fiction (Parkhurst 3). Junior's use of typical teenage conversational language makes it less challenging to relate to Junior as a character. At the same time, the novel is filled with short conversations. The conversations are fast-paced and reflects how teenage boys often talk to each other. A conversation between Junior and his best friend Rowdy illustrates short and abrupt sentences:

"Come in!" I shouted.

And Rowdy walked inside.

"Wow," I said.

"Yeah," he said.

We'd always been such scintillating conversationalists.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I'm bored," he said.

“The last time I saw you, you tried to punch me,” I said.

“I missed.”

“I thought you were going to break my nose.”

“I wanted to break your nose.” (Alexie 227).

This conversation is an example of typical male vernacular language. Robin Lakoff argues that the male speaker is precise and straightforward. The male speaker “tells us as little as possible about the speaker’s state of mind and his attitude toward the addressee” (qtd. in Smiley 2). At the same time, the typical male vernacular language is characterized by no hedging or imprecision (Smiley 2). Although this is a very stereotypical viewpoint on the male speaker, it is useful when considering how the language of a male protagonist can motivate young boys to read more. The typical male vernacular language in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* can motivate young boys to read because it acts as a relatable factor. Moreover, the fast-paced and straightforward language makes the novel less challenging to follow along for struggling readers (Gavigan 14).

The gendered language is also identified in the way Junior describes his experiences in the story. Already on the first page of the novel, the reader is introduced to a language that is directed towards the male world. When describing his cerebral spinal condition, Junior uses metaphorical language that speaks to stereotypical male interests:

But cerebral spinal fluid is just the doctors’ fancy way of saying brain grease. And brain grease works inside the lobes like car grease works inside an engine. It keeps things running smooth and fast. But weirdo me, I was born with too much grease inside my skull, and it got all thick and muddy and disgusting, and it only mucked up the works. My thinking and breathing and living engine slowed down and flooded (Alexie 1).

By describing his skull as a car engine, Junior’s gendered language manages to hook the male reader already on the first page. At the same time, the connection between his medical condition and the car engine acts as a scaffolding feature and makes it less difficult for struggling male readers to create meaning from this passage. The gendered language connects the novel to real life interests, because as seen, when boys’ interests are honored, they instantly become more motivated to read (Gavigan 14).

Junior himself, as a fictional character and his journey throughout the novel also speaks on the interests of young boys. Farris et al. found in their study concerning boys' reading preferences that boys enjoy following a character through various situations. Moreover, boys prefer novels with protagonists that are not portrayed as perfect, instead they prefer protagonists with believable flaws (184). Junior is not depicted as a stereotypical hero or a "perfect guy". Instead, he describes himself as a boy with multiple flaws. For instance, he was born with a medical condition, he is skinny and goofy-looking, and he is a victim of bullying and states that everybody on the "rez" calls him a retard twice a day. The "rez" Junior refers to is the Spokane Indian Reservation he and his family lives on.

Do you know what happens to retards on the rez?

We get beat up.

At least once a month.

Yep, I belong to the Black-Eye-of-the-Month Club (Alexie 4).

This passage from the novel demonstrates that Junior is the opposite of the classic fictional hero. Farris et al. also found that novels with characters facing challenges and hardships were particularly popular among young boys. These types of novels are found to be popular among young male readers because they often illustrate that disabilities and liabilities are possible to overcome or used in an encouraging way to face challenges (184), which is the case for Alexie's novel. Junior seems to have the whole world against him, yet, he manages to overcome the challenges he faces, frequently using humor as a defense mechanism. This proves that Junior is an ideal role model for young male readers, teaching them valuable lessons on life and how to overcome challenges many young boys find themselves in during adolescence. Furthermore, Junior's realistic qualities demonstrate that having flaws is normal, making it easier for boys to relate to him and his story.

Continuing on the idea of Junior not being the classic fictional hero, Harrison writes that boys' reading—including what they read and how they understand it—will be affected by their own understanding of who they are and what they think is acceptable in masculine environments (47). With this being said, it is important that boys are exposed to different concepts of perceived acceptable masculinity in order to make them become more engaged readers (Harrison 47). In the novel, the stereotypical fictional hero is embodied in "Roger the

Giant” (Alexie 136) and his friends. Junior describes them as “monster dudes” looking like men that had to shave two or three times a day (Alexie 56). Even though a stereotypical concept of masculinity is presented in the novel, Junior’s character introduces young male readers to a new concept of masculinity. As mentioned, Junior is small and skinny and is often the victim of bullying. Moreover, his disability can also be seen as a hinder. This is in strong contrast to the typical fictional hero, which is often depicted as physically strong, popular, and “cool”. Even though Junior does not fit into the category of being a typical fictional hero, he is aware of his differences, and celebrates who he is (Crandall 73). He challenges the stereotypical picture of masculinity. This can be seen in the novel when Junior punches Roger in the face after he tells an untasteful and racist joke. Here, Junior says that the act of punching Roger was his way of telling the world that he was no longer a human target (Alexie 64-5). This event illustrates how the classical hero can be found even in the wimpy and skinny kid, which is a more realistic representation of real life. Martino and Kehler discussed the importance of redeveloping these stereotypical concepts of masculinity instead of reinforcing it. By redeveloping these concepts, boys are given the opportunity to broaden and promote their emotional literacy (qtd. in Harrison 48). Moreover, being exposed to different masculine concepts can open up the possibility for boys to relate to different characters in fiction. This can lead to them being more motivated to read as they will have a less challenging experience with relating to characters similar to themselves.

2.3 The novel’s topics and reading motivation

Many contemporary works of young-adult novels discuss and challenge traditional stereotypes and attitudes. Likewise, these novels sometimes even challenge the status quo, often making them controversial. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is a great example of a young-adult novel that does exactly this. After its publication, the novel received a great deal of criticism from Native American Communities due to its portrayal of life on the reservation as dysfunctional and dominated by alcoholism, violence, and hopelessness (Carlsen 219). Although the novel has been criticized for its depiction of Native American reservations, the novel shed light on many important topics that a lot of young boys can relate with. Identity, puberty, friendship, bullying, taboos, loneliness, death, love, family relations, the use of racial and homophobic slurs, and sports are just some of the many topics represented in the novel.

In an interview with the author, Sherman Alexie is asked what he think it is about Junior's life that helps other kids make sense of their own lives. To this, Alexie answers: "Well, my initial response is to say that if they read the book, they should think that if this poor-ass reservation kid can make it, it should be easy for them, living in the suburbs" (Blasingame 73). He further states that the novel takes young people seriously because it does not censor tough topics. When censoring novels, Alexie argues that the censorship is an attempt to make young people and their lives simple. In this way, young people will have good responses to the novel because it creates the feeling of being taken seriously (Blasingame 73). The novel's ability to discuss tough topics without censorship, acknowledges young males' challenges in life. When young males' challenges are acknowledged, their interests are also honored, which Gavigan argues will intrinsically motivate them to read more (14).

It is plausible that not all boys can relate to every topic of the novel, however, as they are in the often troubling teenage years, it is possible that some of the topics are relatable. At the same time, by giving a voice to these topics, Carlsen argues that "youth novels often articulate topics that are important to both young people and the larger society, some of which rarely be discussed openly among peers in this age group" (Carlsen 220). A good example from the novel that discusses topics that are perceived as taboo is the topic of sexuality. When Junior talks about his masturbation habits, he starts by stating that most boys, no matter what age, likes girls and their curves (Alexie 25), and then admits to the fact that he masturbates:

Yep, that's right, I admit that I masturbate. I'm proud of it. I'm good at it. I'm ambidextrous. If there were a Professional Masturbators League, I'd get drafted number one and make millions of dollars. And maybe you're thinking, "Well you really shouldn't be talking about masturbation in public." Well, tough, I'm going to talk about it because EVERYBODY does it. And EVERYBODY likes it. And if God hadn't wanted us to masturbate, then God wouldn't have given us thumbs (Alexie 26).

During adolescent development, teenagers often explore their own bodies, without really talking about it with other peers in this age group. Fiction that normalizes and talks about tougher topics that are not openly discussed, can make it easier for young boys to experience a sense of identity and belonging when reading fiction. Again, when their interests are voiced in fiction, boys will become more motivated to read (Gavigan 14). This means that the novel's emphasis on normalizing the topic of sexuality and masturbation can act as a motivating factor concerning reading.

Another great topic the novel discusses is sports. The fact that the novel discusses sports as one of the many topics within the novel, is important as it appeals to a lot of boys' interests (Sullivan 11). Junior likes to play basketball, and even though he is smaller and not as fast as his teammates, Junior is allowed on the varsity team at Reardan. As it turns out, Junior is a great shooter and is going to be the coach's secret weapon, his "Weapon of Mass Destruction" (Alexie 142). Although *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* cannot be identified as a sole sports book, its' connection to sports and why it is important for young boys must be discussed. Michael Sullivan explains how and why sports books are appealing for young male readers. He argues that sports books have plots that support the interests of the reader. This makes the novel "seem less like work than novels about personal relationships do" (Sullivan 11). The implemented events of basketball games and Junior's thoughts on the sport, shift the focus from Junior's journey of finding his identity on to something many boys can relate to. Boys will often find these plot stories more interesting as they see sports as identifiably male (Sullivan 11). Moreover, Sullivan explains that many boys will enjoy the sports plot because it can give clues to their own futures (11). In the novel, Junior explains his interests for basketball as a result of his father and Rowdy's love for the sport. He goes on to say that he saw himself as "one of those players who sat on the bench and cheered his bigger, faster, more talented teammates to victory and/or defeat" (Alexie 179). However, as seen, Junior joined the varsity team and became the team's star shooter. This illustrates how there is hope for everyone, inspiring and encouraging boys to believe in themselves. It is therefore important that teachers take boys who are interested in sports seriously and honor this interest, because, as Sullivan clarifies, "Sports may seem like a poor metaphor for life to many educators, but many boys will feel otherwise" (11).

2.4 Crude humor and reading motivation

Humor in novels is considered a powerful tool when trying to reach boys that are not motivated to read. Michael Sullivan argues that humor is especially useful concerning boys who read below grade level or boys who experience reading as challenging. For these boys, humor can be seen as a relief (10). Furthermore, in a study concerning boys reading preferences, Jonathan Wicks found that humorous books are the most popular genre when boys do read (Wicks 13). *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is filled with humorous events and illustrations. The humor can often be considered as rather crude and edgy, to which Sullivan

claims can be attractive for boys. When the novel contains such humor, boys will push back against “the constriction of adults by seeking release in the forbidden” (10). It is therefore possible that the novel’s comedy speaks to young boys’ interests. However, the novel is also filled with tragic events involving death, alcoholism, racism, and violence. As Jim Blasingame writes: “How can the heart rending story of a little boy’s battle for his life be so funny? It’s all in how he tells the tale” (70). As previously discussed, Junior uses his drawings as a mechanism for coping with grief and anger (Alexie 171, 178). When something tragic happens in the novel, like the deaths of numerous family members and friends, Junior is somehow always able to tell the stories infused with a touch of comedy. Moreover, all of Junior’s descriptions of the various events in the novel are full of humorous and colorful language. When describing his appearance and the resulting bullying, Junior’s sense of humor and his ability to see things from a positive perspective is highly evident in the novel: “My head was so big that little Indian skulls orbited around it. Some of the kids called me Orbit. And other kids just called me Globe. The bullies would pick me up, spin me in circles, put their finger down on my skull, and say, ‘I want to go there’” (Alexie 3). Here, Junior masks his feelings towards being bullied for his appearance with humor. The probability that there exist people that enjoy being bullied and harassed is low. However, Junior’s choice of words when describing these events illustrates that he uses humor to protect his feelings.

The author of the novel, Sherman Alexie, has shown a tendency to use humor when addressing serious topics in his works (Kertzer 70). In an interview with the author, Alexie argues that “By using humor publicly, I may be showing people how to use it as a defense mechanism, or maybe as a weapon, too” (Blasingame 69). As *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is based on Alexie’s personal experiences, Junior acts as a persona for his childhood. In his acceptance speech at the Horn Book Awards, Alexie said that the novel is about three-fourths autobiography and one-fourth fiction (“The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian” 1). Many of the events that takes place in the novel are actual representations of events that happened in his own life. Alexie was born with the same disease as Junior and he also left the Spokane Indian Reservation to attend Reardan High School when learning that his mother used the same schoolbook as him (Alexie 31). Among the tragic events in the novel, just like Junior, Alexie also lost his sister in a trailer fire (Alexie 205; “The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian” 1). The fact that the novel is based on Alexie’s own experiences illustrates how the use of humor can convey important lessons on life. Furthermore, Alexie’s

use of crude and black humor to depict Junior's story and events in the novel can teach young boys possible techniques for coping and talking about serious topics.

3 The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

Published in 2003, Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* has resonated with both adolescents and adults. Though Haddon never intended to write a novel about a boy with Asperger's Syndrome, and therefore never did any specific research on the disability (Muller 119), parents of children with Asperger's has welcomed the novel with open arms for shedding light on the disability. As well as being praised by parents, the novel has also been applauded by social workers and the medical community (Muller 119). The novel takes on fifteen-year-old Christopher John Francis Boone and his journey to solve the murder of his neighbor's dog, Wellington. Christopher is a mathematician and a logician (Ciocia 322), and knows all the countries of the world and their capital cities and every prime number up to 7,507 (Haddon 2), but he does not know the truth of his mother's death. When the truth is revealed, Christopher discovers that his father has not only murdered Wellington but also hidden letters from his alive and breathing mother. He runs away from home in search of his mother in London. The novel's success among all readers of all ages, Ciocia claims, is due to the charm of Christopher's characteristic narrative voice and the "compelling effect of estrangement, with its ensuring tragicomic moments, that comes from seeing the world through the eyes of a boy with Asperger's" (323).

In terms of multimodality, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* differs from *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. While Alexie's novel is filled with descriptive and comical cartoons and drawings, Haddon's novel attends to illustrations in the forms of graphs, maps, and charts. Even though the novels differ in multimodal stylistics, the main protagonists in both novels share some common characteristics. Firstly, they're both young teenage boys within the age-group many teenage boys can identify with, which is a factor proven to encourage reading motivation (Carlsen 212; Roe 25). Secondly, they're both outsiders of society. Junior is an outsider because of his physical appearance while being torn between two identities, struggling to fit within the expectations set by the two societies he stands between. Christopher is an outsider in the sense of being different from most teenage boys. He thinks differently and struggles with socializing and understanding the nuances of language exchanges (Muller 121). Thirdly, both Junior and Christopher has challenges in the form of disabilities. Junior has physical disabilities due to being born with "too much spinal fluid" (Haddon 1), while Christopher has mental disabilities in the form of Asperger's Syndrome.

So why should we read these two novels side by side? The similar, albeit diverse depictions of two young male protagonists can reach a bigger male audience. Both novels and their protagonists can teach young male readers to believe in their hopes and dreams, proving that physical and mental disabilities are not to be considered as hindrances. The novels can teach valuable lessons about mental and social diversity while attending to factors that can enhance reading motivation, such as multimodality and relatable male protagonists. While Alexie's novel possibly motivates a larger group of male readers, Haddon's novel can be interpreted as a multimodal novel that reaches boys who are more interested in the mystery genre and problem solving.

3.1 The novel's multimodality and reading motivation

In comparison with Alexie's novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is less graphic and contains fewer multimodal features. Even though this is the case, the novel still carries a lot of multimodality in the forms of graphs, diagrams, and tables. These features are used by Christopher as a mechanism to make sense of the world around him (Nørgaard 210). As already mentioned, these multimodal forms are proven to make male readers more engaged with the text they are reading, making them score just as good, or even better than girls on reading tests (Roe 25). The inclusion of such multimodal forms in the novel is therefore likely to foster engagement and motivation among boys because they appeal to boys' interests outside reading.

Another significant difference between Alexie and Haddon's novels is the style of the illustrations. While Alexie's novel contains illustrations that are presented as Junior's drawings, Haddon's novel contains illustrations that does not appear to be drawn by a human hand (Nørgaard 210). Even though the illustrations are less realistically presented, some of them are still referred to as drawings. This is demonstrated when Christopher refers to his teacher Siobhan's drawings of different smiley faces (Haddon 2), a cow he has drawn (Haddon 176), and a London bus (Haddon 256). Nina Nørgaard argues that the drawings in Haddon's novel are "integrated closely into the verbal narrative by means of linguistic markers of cohesion," (210). When Christopher refers to his drawing of the bus, Christopher writes: "I drew a picture of a bus using perspective so that I didn't think about the pain in my chest and it looked like this" (Haddon 256), which is then followed by the drawing of the bus. Christopher depends on structure, and has often strict timetables he follows because he likes "to know when everything

is going to happen” (Haddon 192). The pain in Christopher’s chest relates to the loss of structure he experiences when he finds his mother in London. Moreover, the lack of structure led to Christopher missing his test in A level mathematics (Haddon 254), something he was looking forward to. This demonstrates that Christopher’s drawings often are integrated with the text, and not a separate and independent feature. While the illustrations in Alexie and Haddon’s novels are different, they are used in the same manner by both Junior and Christopher. Similarly, to Junior, Christopher uses his drawings as a coping mechanism, often to make sense of the world and calm himself down when the world around him is confusing.

Nørgaard further argues that the use of the drawings and the verbal content together create an element of verisimilitude (210). This demonstrates that the drawings in Haddon’s novel are added to the text to act as a scaffolding feature, making it less challenging to make meaning out of verbal content alone. The multimodal features in the novel help Christopher to make meaning out of the verbal content in the novel. They often point to or develop on already existing plotlines. While Christopher can be seen as different from most boys, he uses these illustrations as a way to understand the world around him. At the same time, he uses the illustrations in order to convey messages that he is unable to convey through verbal content alone. Throughout the novel, Christopher shows signs of struggling with imagination and creating pictures in his head. This demonstrates how Christopher, like many young male readers is struggling with reading, although in his own manner. Furthermore, he struggles with conveying these pictures in his head to the reader through verbal content. An example of this can be seen in the novel when Siobhan tells Christopher that he should include some descriptions of things when writing his murder mystery novel (Haddon 5), where Christopher’s reply is that he could take photographs and put them in the book instead (Haddon 85). His reply suggests that he finds descriptions unnecessary when you could include a picture instead, which is what Christopher does for the most part when describing his experiences. When describing clouds, Christopher includes an illustration of one of them. When doing this, Christopher allows the reader to see through his eyes. Even more importantly, while the illustrations help Christopher in conveying his message, they also help boys who struggle with reading or motivation to read in the sense that the illustrations will act as a scaffolding feature in the process of understanding the verbal content. This will ultimately make the reading experience less challenging for the male reader (Jaffe & Hurwich 5, 12).

Even though *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* differ in multimodal stylistics, they do share the use of lists as a

multimodal feature. Both Junior and Christopher use lists as a way to understand the world. While their way of creating lists are somewhat different, they both use lists as a mechanism for coping with challenging experiences. After the death of his grandmother, sister, and Eugene, Junior and his family had been living inside a “grief-storm” (Alexie 175). As Junior himself states, the only way he could make it through all of that death and change was to find the little pieces of joy left in his life. He does this by making lists: lists of people who had given him the most joy in his life, his favorite musicians, favorite foods, favorite books, and favorite basketball players (Alexie 176-78). Junior’s lists illustrate how organizing the things he enjoys in the world makes him feel more calm and grounded when the odds are against him. Christopher’s lists, on the other hand, are of the more descriptive kind while informing the reader about his way of seeing the world. Among the many lists he makes throughout the novel, lists about things he hates (and why), his suspects in the murder mystery, and lists that explicitly depicts how he sees the world differently from others are just some examples of lists he makes. An example that illustrates Christopher’s view of the world is the two lists he makes to demonstrate how he would see the countryside compared to how most people would see it. According to him, most people would perceive the countryside like this:

1. I am standing in a field that is full of grass.
2. There are some cows in the fields.
3. It is sunny with a few clouds.
4. There are some flowers in the grass.
5. There is a village in the distance.
6. There is a fence at the edge of the field and it has a gate in (Haddon 174).

Parts of Christopher’s list of how he would see the same countryside:

1. There are 19 cows in the field, 15 of which are black and white and 4 of which are brown and white.
2. There is a village in the distance which has 31 visible houses and a church with a square tower and not a spire.
3. There are ridges in the field which means that in medieval times it was what is called a *ridge and furrow* field and people who lived in the village would have a ridge each to do farming on.

4. There is an old plastic bag from Asda in the hedge, and a squashed Coca-Cola can with a snail on, and a long piece of orange string (Haddon 175).

Similarly, to Christopher's illustrations, his lists also act as a scaffolding feature in the reading process. They do so by supporting his thought process and shed light on the way his mind works which can, as Nussbaum claims, lead to readers developing a sympathetic imagination (qtd. in Carlsen 210). When the reader develops sympathetic imagination, the reader possibly also acquires empathy for the character as well. When reading, the reader enters a "third space" meaning that the reader tries to create meaning out of the narrative and understand the attitudes and values that are communicated through the narrative. During this process, the reader also reflects on his own standpoint of the narrative (Carlsen 210). As Christopher can be perceived as different from most boys, his lists and illustrations are important in order to understand him and his way of seeing the world. When the young male reader develops empathy for Christopher, their involvement in the story and the reading process increases, which can encourage reading motivation in relation to future reading experiences.

In the novel, Christopher shows a tendency of launching into digressions on topics that he enjoys, often being topics surrounding mathematics and facts. Even though Christopher's digressions are rarely relevant to the development of the plot (Ciocia 322), his digressions should be investigated further. The digressions are often interesting tirades that involves problem solving, which invites the reader into Christopher's mind, allowing them to take part in the process of solving various problems. This can be seen as an attempt to keep the reader interested and create an engaging story. A notable example from the novel is the chapter addressing The Monty Hall Problem (Haddon 78). This chapter allows the reader to take a more active part in the novel and encourages the reader to participate in a problem-solving technique with Christopher (Hallet 294). While Christopher presents a rather challenging formula that can solve the problem, he also offers a flowchart that allows the reader to understand more precisely his way of understanding and solving the problem (Haddon 81). Not only does Christopher's flowchart scaffold and aid meaning, but it also creates a more interactive reading experience. This can encourage reading motivation due to male readers being more oriented towards visual learning (Gavigan 34; Krumsvik 123), often responding positively to the visual elements in multimodal novels. Studies on gender differences in mathematical problem solving consistently report that male students perform better on mathematical problem solving compared to female students (Zhu 199). The fact that male students perform better on mathematical problems can

possibly demonstrate that young male readers will respond positively to Christopher's digressions on mathematical problems. Since studies suggest that males perform better on mathematical problems, it is likely that they have a positive experience with solving mathematical problems. Furthermore, when Christopher introduces The Monty Hall Problem, he says that one of his teachers believes that he likes mathematics because it is safe and gives straightforward answers and compares it with life's unanswered questions: "what he meant was that maths wasn't like life because in life there are no straightforward answer at the end" (Haddon 78). Christopher's dislike for unclear answers can be seen in connection with his dislike for "proper novels" as they often contain hidden meanings (Haddon 5). The straightforward answers in the mathematical problems can have a positive influence on young males' reading motivation, because they act as a pause in the reading process, allowing the reader a break from reading between the lines of a "proper novel".

3.2 The murder mystery genre and reading motivation

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time combines many different narrative choices that might distance the young male reader from Christopher. Christopher's unique voice, his numerous digressions on mathematical problems, and the chapters being arranged and labeled with prime numbers (Cho 96) are some of the factors that can distance the reader from Christopher. Soohyun Cho argues that this is where the detection and murder mystery genre play an important role in creating a connection between the reader and Christopher (96). The genre of the novel is crucial when it comes to boys and reading motivation. In Michael Sullivan's book *Serving Boys Through Readers Advisory*, Sullivan discusses what boys like to read. Among the many genres he describes as typical "boy genres", including humor, science fiction and fantasy, gothic horror, and action and adventure books, Sullivan mentions mystery novels as one of them. He explains that mystery novels are a genre that can appeal to both genders. However, the critical line between being a "boy book" and a "girl book" is whether it focuses more on plot over characterization (Sullivan 10-11). Sullivan believes that if teachers promote books with active subjects that focus on plot elements instead of characterization, boys' interests will be honored (3). If one considers this belief in connection with Haddon's novel, it is possible to explore how Haddon uses the murder mystery genre as a distraction from Christopher's "Behavioural Problems" (Haddon 59). Christopher uses a lot of time discussing detective fiction in the novel, even dedicating a whole chapter explaining why he likes Conan

Doyle's *The Hound of Baskervilles* and Sherlock Holmes (Haddon 88-93). As Cho points out, Sherlock Holmes is one of the most famous classical detectives, and Haddon seems to favor the classical detective genre as the main outline for the novel (92), which can explain Christopher's inspiration for solving the murder mystery of Wellington. In this sense, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is a fast-paced mystery novel that has its main focus on plot, yet still manages to touch on the subject of characterization in the form of character development through Christopher's journey.

In the novel, Christopher compares himself with Sherlock Holmes, claiming that they both are able to detach their minds and notice things that other people are unable to see (Haddon 92). He also connects his own murder mystery with *The Hound of Baskervilles*'s mystery, saying that every detective story contains clues and Red Herrings (Haddon 90). He applies these motifs to his own investigation of Wellington's murder (Cho 93), saying that the garden fork that killed Wellington must belong to Mrs. Shears after discovering it in her shed: "This meant that the fork belonged to Mrs Shears. Either that or it was a Red Herring, which is a clue which makes you come to a wrong conclusion or something which looks like a clue but isn't" (Haddon 40). Christopher also uses his knowledge of classic detective motifs when questioning his neighbor, Mrs. Alexander, understanding that she is hiding something due to her avoidance of his questions. Christopher knows that in order to be good detective, it is important to put pressure on people to get answers (Haddon 74). When Christopher pressures Mrs. Alexander, he learns that his mother and Mr. Shears were "very, very good friends" (Haddon 76). Cho argues that Christopher's use of classic detective motifs illustrate that he has read a lot of detective novels and therefore understands the typical patterns of the mystery genre. Cho further points out that this helps readers acknowledge Christopher's "level of intelligence and his ability to comprehend fiction, which itself shows a glimpse of Christopher's mind" (93). This is important in order to understand Christopher's way of thinking. When the young male reader is familiar with this, it will become less challenging to relate to the character. Therefore, the mystery genre acts as a bridge between Christopher's mind and the young male reader.

Similarly, to many boys who find reading challenging, Christopher does not like "proper novels" (Haddon 5). He states early that the novel is a mystery novel and that he finds proper novels confusing because the people in these novels say things like "I am veined with iron, with silver and with streaks of common mud. I cannot contract into the firm fist which those clench who do not depend on stimulus" (Haddon 5). Just like Christopher, it is plausible that boys will find this confusing. His thoughts on proper novels speak to the young male reader, creating a

relatable bond between Christopher and the male reader, with Christopher expressing this shared understanding of proper novels being “boring” and challenging. Furthermore, a complicated language is not likely to foster reading engagement among boys as it will be challenging to make meaning. However, if the language is clear and direct, it will not only make the novel easier to read, but it also makes the novel more real to boys (Sullivan 8). Sullivan points out that “boy books” often focuses less on description, metaphors, imagery, and other literary devices that makes a novel a mystery (8). He further points to B. Pirie and his statement about males and reading:

To some men, more comfortable with the literal and the explicit, it seems that both poems and women expect you to read between the lines. What teachers see as subtlety or implication sometimes get translated in boys’ minds into a blind hunt for secret messages and the perverse notion that literature has hidden meanings. What kind of nutty person would try to hide meaning? Why can’t they just come out and tell you what they mean? (qtd. in Sullivan 8).

Indeed, this statement is very stereotypical and will not apply to every male reader. Yet, there are still something we can take from it. Considering Christopher’s feelings toward “proper novels” and their tendency to use cryptic and difficult language, Christopher further states that he does not like proper novels because “they are lies about things which didn’t happen and they make me feel shaky and scared” (Haddon 25). B. Pirie’s statement about males and reading can be seen in connection with how Christopher feels toward hidden meanings in proper novels. However, Christopher likes murder mystery novels and says that solving a murder mystery is like solving a puzzle. If it is a good puzzle depends on whether one can work out the answer before the end of the novel (Haddon 5). Ruth Gilbert argues that mystery novels give Christopher a possibility to “understand and to frame his own story,” (243) and further points to Peter Hühn who argues that the mystery/detective genre creates a contest between the detective and the criminal as they both “struggle to possess meaning in the narrative” (qtd. in Gilbert 243). In this sense, the criminal “writes” the crime and the detective has to “read” the signs that are left behind (clues) in order to solve the mystery (Gilbert 243). A reason as to why Christopher likes mystery novels over proper novels can be seen in connection with his obsession with numbers and structure. He prefers to read books about mathematics and science (Haddon 5), two subjects associated with problem solving. Christopher’s love for problem solving creates a connection between him and the young male reader as studies show males

performing better than females on mathematical problem solving (Zhu 199), making it easier for the young male reader to relate with Christopher.

On the other side, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* differs somewhat from typical murder mystery novels. In *Multimodal Stylistics of the Novel* (2019), Nina Nørgaard discusses Haddon's novel in connection with multimodality and how the book's cover can have an impact on the reader. She argues that Haddon's novel is different from the conventional murder mystery novel because "the expectations set up by the title are not quite fulfilled by the verbal narrative" (Nørgaard 232). By this, Nørgaard claims that the many digressions on Christopher's favorite subjects, such as mathematics and science, throughout the novel, are unrelated to the murder mystery plot (232). These digressions create a pause in the murder mystery narrative, which are uncommon for typical novels within the genre. However, these digressions allow the reader to learn more about Christopher and his personality. It is through Christopher's monologues about logic, reason, and facts that the reader truly gets to know him and understand him on a deeper level. These digressions shed light on Christopher's difficulty with handling his emotions and interacting with people (Nørgaard 232), which also makes the novel unique in its nature. It is this uniqueness that ultimately gives the reader insight on why Christopher is fixated on numbers and structure. When the reader is familiar with Christopher and his way of thinking, it is less challenging to make meaning of the story, which then again can lead to reading motivation (Sullivan 3). As Christopher's digressions on unrelated topics to the murder mystery plot shed light on his way of perceiving the world surrounding him, the male reader will also learn more about mental disability. Seen in connection with the interdisciplinary topic of health and life skills, when the male reader is exposed to different ways of thinking, they are invited to take part in a process that allows the reader to develop on their feelings, thoughts, experiences, and opinions they have with mental disabilities. When the young male reader is familiar with Christopher's thought process his diagnosis becomes less relevant, making it more meaningful to learn about his understanding of the world. This further gives the male reader experience with dealing with different ways of thinking, which the interdisciplinary topic health and life skills argues can give them a sense of achievement and develop a more positive self-image. When the young male reader experiences a sense of achievement and develops a more positive self-image through reading, a possible motivation for future reading follows. The fact that the novel differs from standard mystery novels can therefore act as a motivating factor for reluctant male readers.

Another factor that separates *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* from other conventional murder mystery novels is the fact that the mystery is solved already half-way through the novel. The revealing of Wellington's murderer being his own father (Haddon 150) illustrates that the murder mystery plot had "no significant thematic value to the narrative" (Nørgaard 232). Instead, the revealing of the murderer in the middle of the story demonstrates that the novel's plot is more about Christopher's journey and his coping with the death of his mother, who in reality did not die but left her family for another man. Even though the main mystery is solved early, Cho argues that there now exists a bond between the reader and Christopher. It takes time to build this bond, especially when the bond is between a "normal" reader and an "abnormal" narrator (96). In this case, the murder mystery genre plays an important role in building a bond between the reader and Christopher, because the genre holds the reader's attention long enough for the reader to build a bond to Christopher, while at the same time "providing a sense of comfort and expectancy" (Cho 96). When the mystery of Wellington's murder is solved, the young male reader has already created a bond between him and Christopher, and therefore are more devoted to further get to know Christopher. It will then be less challenging to recognize details that they otherwise would have overlooked. As an example, the young male reader is now able to understand why Christopher loathes yellow and brown because they understand that this is important to Christopher and not because they relate to the mystery (Cho 96). This makes it easier for the young male reader to relate to Christopher, even though Christopher's way of thinking and seeing the world is different from their own.

3.3 Christopher's disability and reading motivation

To understand why Christopher as a male protagonist can encourage reading motivation, it is important to demonstrate how his disability influences the reading experience. As mentioned, Christopher has Asperger's Syndrome. Interestingly, as Nørgaard writes—and evidently in the novel itself—it is never explicitly stated that Christopher is diagnosed with Asperger's (233). Christopher himself claims that he has behavioral problems (Haddon 59), but never mentions autism of Asperger's. Instead, the reader is informed by this when reading the book description on the back cover. In an interview with the author, Haddon explains how the first publication of the novel included this piece of information on the back cover, and that he wishes that the information was neglected in future editions of the book. Though, the information was still included in future editions as well, most likely to boost sales (Nørgaard 233). In line with

Haddon's wish to neglect the information on Christopher's disability, Haddon claims that the novel is not a novel about Asperger's, instead it is a "novel about difference, about being an outsider, about seeing the world in a surprising and revealing way" (qtd. in Nørgaard 233). However, it is possible that this viewpoint of the novel disappears when the information on Christopher's disability is explicitly stated. Nørgaard argues that the original meaning of Christopher and his story got twisted and changed due to the explicit naming of his disability (233). If this is the case, then the novel's focus on individuality and difference shifted towards being a novel exclusively about a boy with Asperger's as a result.

The inclusion of this information can also lead to alienation in the sense of more boys struggling to identify with the Christopher. When the information is known to them, the distance between "normal" boys and Christopher increases. In Vivienne Muller's article, she discusses Christopher alongside disability theories and argues that the term "disability" has been strongly challenged because it is seen to be "negative tagging and abjectness of being; an 'other' to the 'good and proper' social and physical body" (118). With this in mind, it is possible that the young male reader will apply already existing ideas and labels on Christopher, creating an even larger distance between him and Christopher. In line with this idea, Haddon explains how labels can influence the reader:

Labels say nothing about a person. They say only how the rest of us categorise that person. Good literature is always about peeling labels off. And treating real people with dignity is always about peeling the labels off. A diagnosis may lead to practical help. But genuinely understanding another human being involves talking and listening to them and finding out what makes them an individual, not what makes them part of a group (qtd. in Nørgaard 233).

As Haddon points out, a diagnosis *can* give practical help, however in this case, being aware of Christopher's diagnosis may be rather hurtful than helpful in the process of getting to know and understand Christopher. When labeling Christopher as a boy with Asperger's Syndrome, his differences from other teenage boys that makes him unique, can be overshadowed by the heavy emphasis on his diagnosis, which ultimately can enhance internal prejudices and ideas.

Even though the explicit naming of the disability is included, and consequently manipulated the young male reader's way of discovering and understanding Christopher, it can still be considered as a useful tool for struggling readers. When this information is known to

the reader, it is possible that it will be less challenging to understand why Christopher acts and thinks the way he does. It will then be easier for struggling readers to make meaning out of Christopher's behavior. Furthermore, the emphasis on his diagnosis can also be seen as a great example of a novel that manages to shed light on differences in our society. McClimens claims that the novel is "an ethnographic delight" where Haddon has managed to write a novel that "turns on the central character's difference without making that difference a stigmatizing characteristic" (qtd. in Muller 11). Moreover, Christopher as a character and his disability not only demystifies Asperger's, but he also makes the disability a "phenomenological and engaging driver of the narrative" (Muller 121). The characterization of Christopher allows the reader to explore a world where Asperger's is positively articulated as an ability instead of a disability. The reader is given the opportunity to appreciate Christopher's characteristics that make him different as unique and enriching aspects of individuals (Muller 121). Christopher's unique manner is something that can appeal to the young male reader as it demonstrates what the society would consider as "flaws". This is important in connection with reading motivation as boys prefer to read novels with protagonists that are portrayed with believable flaws (Farris et al. 184).

Christopher's uniqueness and disability also encourages the young male reader to participate more actively in the reading process. His disability influences the way he sees and understand the world. He finds people confusing because they "do a lot of talking without using any words" and because they use metaphors when talking (Haddon 19). He is also unable to identify people's emotions unless they show expressions for happy or sad (Haddon 2). Due to his inability to recognize common human behavior, it is possible that the young male reader categorizes Christopher as an unreliable narrator. However, as Mullan explains, this is not the case. His understanding of the world does not ask the reader to be skeptical about what he says, instead the reader is encouraged to fill in the missing pieces of his understanding of the world (43). Even though Christopher claims that he always tells the truth (Haddon 23) and are unable to tell lies (Haddon 24) because of his disability, he is not always able to tell the reader what is truly happening in the story. Thus, the young male reader has to actively fill in the gaps Christopher is unable to detect. For example, when Christopher learns through the conversation with Mrs. Alexander that his mother was "very good friends" with Mr. Shears (Haddon 76), the young male reader can presume what really happened, understanding that his mother had an affair. This is not grasped by Christopher, and therefore not explained to the reader. When the young male reader has to actively supply to Christopher's understanding of the world and

people around him, Cho argues that “Haddon turns the whole process of accessing an autistic boy’s mind into a detection process” (96). In other words, the reader has to do their own detection work in order to understand and relate to Christopher, which creates a more engaging reading experience.

Christopher’s unique way of seeing the world also creates opportunities for a humorous reading experience. As already explored, boys enjoy humor in novels, and humor is a useful tool for reaching boys who experience reading as challenging (Sullivan 10). Even though we can recognize humorous passages in Haddon’s novel, it differs somewhat from Alexie’s use of humor. While Alexie’s novel contains wittingly crude humor, Haddon’s humor comes in the form of deadpan humor, which Ciocia claims plays a significant role in obtaining the reader’s interest with Christopher and the novel (323). Due to his disability, Christopher’s language in the novel is extremely precise and straightforward, avoiding unnecessary descriptions, and lacking emotion. Christopher states early in the novel that “This will not be a funny book. I cannot tell jokes because I do not understand them” (Haddon 10), however, the fact that he cannot understand jokes and therefore does not try to be funny, is indeed what makes some of Christopher’s sayings funny. For example, when Christopher finds Wellington with a garden fork sticking out of him, he tries to find a logical reason for his death:

I decided that the dog was probably killed with the fork because I could not see any other wounds in the dog and I do not think you would stick a garden fork into a dog after it had died for some other reason, like cancer for example, or a road accident. But I could not be certain about this (Haddon 1).

His effort to make sense of Wellington’s death and logical reasoning demonstrates his innocence, which creates a rather comical situation. Christopher does not try to be funny, especially since he does not see the situation as funny. However, the young male reader might find his wording and reasoning as to why someone would stick a garden fork into a dead dog as funny. Another example that illustrates the novel’s deadpan humor is when Christopher talks about why he likes dogs, comparing them to Steven, a special needs student:

I also said that I cared about dogs because they were faithful and honest, and some dogs were cleverer and more interesting than some people. Steve, for example, who comes to school on Thursdays, needs help to eat his food and could not even fetch a stick. Siobhan asked me not to say this to Steve’s mother (Haddon 6).

Christopher's cynical and emotionless language when comparing Steve with a dog displays Christopher's way of being funny without trying. His language is eerily cold but at the same time very innocent and honest, demonstrating how his disability affects his language. While Junior in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* uses humor as a defense mechanism, Christopher uses humor unknowingly. Unknowing of that is considered as acceptable by the society to say and what to not say, Christopher talks without filter and creates humorous situations in the novel.

Even though Christopher's disability makes him differ from most young male readers, it is still possible for the reader to identify with and relate to Christopher. As previously discussed, boys prefer to read about characters that are similar to themselves (Carlsen 212; Roe 25). Indeed, Christopher is a boy within the age-group a lot of teenage boys can identify with, but this is not necessarily the main factor that facilitates their ability to identify with and relate to Christopher. When the young male reader reads literature, he acquires what Nussbaum calls "sympathetic imagination" (qdt. in Carlsen 210), meaning that the young male reader develops empathy for the character(s). However, as Cho claims, Haddon's novel carries many narrative choices that can distance the young male reader from Christopher, such as his idiosyncratic narrative voice and his digressions unrelated to the main plot (96). Although this might be the case, Suzanne Keen believes that "Character identification often invites empathy, even when the character and reader differ from each other in all sorts of practical and obvious ways" (70). This means that even though Christopher differs from the young male readers, they are still able to identify with him due to their feeling of empathy towards him. This idea is more evident in connection with Keen's belief that empathy for a character invites character identification (70), demonstrating that the sense of empathy for and identification with a character goes both ways. An example from the novel that illustrates how Christopher's differences evokes empathy within the young male reader can be seen when Christopher reads the hidden letters from his presumably mother (Haddon 131). Christopher is unable to understand why his father has lied about his mother's death, saying that he "tried really hard to think if there was any other explanation," (Haddon 141). However, what Christopher is unable to detect, the reader is. The young male reader possibly understands that his father hid the truth because of cowardice and protectiveness (Mullan 50) by supplementing to Christopher's understanding. The opportunity to share feelings with a character exceeds the differences between the young male reader and Christopher (Keen 70). This facilitates empathy for Christopher as the young male reader is able to understand something Christopher is unable to due to his disability. When the feeling

of empathy towards Christopher occurs, the young male reader will possibly feel more invested in the story and wanting to learn more about Christopher, ultimately enhancing reading motivation. Furthermore, as Keen argues in connection with empathy and character identification, it is possible to use characters with strong differences didactically, “to develop a reader’s moral sense” (71). In this sense, Christopher’s differences can be used in relation to the interdisciplinary topics. Within the interdisciplinary topic of democracy and citizenship, the student learns new ways to interpret the world. As the novel invites the reader to be critical and ask questions about the terms and labels we as a society use to describe, judge, and categorize people and their behaviors (Muller 123), seeing the world through Christopher’s eyes, can prevent prejudices against people with disabilities such as Asperger’s. This is especially achievable when the reader develops empathy for Christopher.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have analyzed Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* in light of how these two young-adult novels can encourage reading motivation among young male readers in lower secondary school. The main aim of this thesis has been to explore how the novels' use of multimodality, male protagonists, humor, genre, and topics can be utilized as a tool to promote reading motivation for reluctant young male readers. Furthermore, by analyzing the novels, this thesis has also shed light on how they can be used for teaching the interdisciplinary topics *health and life skills* and *democracy and citizenship* from the Norwegian LK20 curriculum for the English subject.

This thesis suggests that the multimodality in both novels can enhance reading motivation albeit in different ways. Alexie's novel demonstrates that multimodality can be used as a scaffolding feature when understanding the verbal content in the novel. Haddon's novel displays how multimodal features that are closely incorporated with the verbal content work together in creating meaning. It also functions as a bridge between the reader and Christopher, developing empathy and identification with him. Concerning the motivational factor of male protagonists, both novels illustrate how the young male reader can relate to and identify with the protagonist. Junior shares a lot of qualities that can be considered as "boy qualities", such as his male vernacular language and his love for sports. Christopher, on the other hand, can be seen as more challenging to identify with. However, his differences can be seen as an advantage when connecting with the young male reader because of the sense of empathy that occurs when getting to know him. Furthermore, both novels use humor in order to reach the young male reader. Alexie's novel employs crude and black humor both in the verbal content and in Junior's cartoons, illuminating Junior's hardships and showing how humor can be used as a defense mechanism. Haddon uses humor differently than Alexie, demonstrating how Christopher's disability creates deadpan humor in normal settings. Likewise, both novels attend to topics and genres a lot of young male readers appreciate, possibly creating an opportunity to discover the joys of reading literature.

Although this thesis can give valuable insight on how the two novels can be used to promote reading motivation, there exists no solid proof of this being true. Therefore, more research needs to be conducted in order to validate that the novels can encourage reading motivation among young male readers through multimodality, male protagonists, humor, genre,

and topics. However, the findings in this thesis can be used as a guideline for teachers and educators when helping young male readers through the jungle of finding suitable young-adult fiction.

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