'Overflows with truth, pain and black comedy amid lacerating memories of life on the rez... the novel is an unforgettable portrait of getting by in harsh circumstances, then getting out.'

NEW YORK TIMES

'Son,' Mr P said, 'you're going to find more and more hope the farther and farther you walk away from this sad, sad, sad reservation.'

'Excellent in every way, poignant and really funny and heart-warming and honest and wise and smart... I have no doubt that in a year or so it'll be winning awards and being banned.'

NEIL GAIMAN
I didn’t know what to do or say, so I just sat as quietly as he did. That silence got so big and real that it felt like three people sat on the porch.

“Do you know why you hit me with that book?” Mr. P finally asked.

It was a trick question. I knew I needed to answer correctly or he’d be mad.

“I hit you because I’m stupid.”

“You’re not stupid.”

Wrong answer.

Shoot.

I tried again.

“I didn’t mean to hit you,” I said. “I was aiming for the wall.”

“Were you really aiming for the wall?”

Dang it.

He was, like, interrogating me.

I was starting to get upset.

“No,” I said. “I wasn’t aiming for anything really. Well, I was planning on hitting something, you know? Like the wall or a desk or the chalkboard. Something dead, you know, not something alive.”

“Alive like me?”

“Or like a plant.”

Mr. P had three plants in his classroom. He talked to those green things more often than he talked to us.

“You do know that hitting a plant and hitting me are two different things, right?” he asked.

“Yeah, I know.”

He smiled mysteriously. Adults are so good at smiling mysteriously. Do they go to college for that?

I was getting more and more freaked out. What did he want?

“You know, Mr. P, I don’t mean to be rude or anything, but you’re, like, freaking me out here. I mean, why are you here, exactly?”

“Well, I want you to know that hitting me with that book was probably the worst thing you’ve ever done. It doesn’t matter what you intended to do. What happens is what you really did. And you broke an old man’s nose. That’s almost unforgivable.”

He was going to punish me now. He couldn’t beat me up with his old man fists, but he could hurt me with his old man words.

“But I do forgive you,” he said. “No matter how much I don’t want to. I have to forgive you. It’s the only thing that keeps me from smacking you with an ugly stick. When I first started teaching here, that’s what we did to the rowdy ones, you know? We beat them. That’s how we were taught to teach you. We were supposed to kill the Indian to save the child.”

“You killed Indians?”

“No, no, it’s just a saying. I didn’t literally kill Indians. We were supposed to make you give up being Indian. Your songs and stories and language and dancing. Everything. We weren’t trying to kill Indian people. We were trying to kill Indian culture.”

Man, at that second, I hated Mr. P hard. I wished I had a whole dang set of encyclopedias to throw at him.

“I can’t apologize to everybody I hurt,” Mr. P said. “But I can apologize to you.”

It was so backward. I’d broken his nose but he was trying to apologize to me.

“I hurt a lot of Indian kids when I was a young teacher,” he said. “I might have broken a few bones.”
All of a sudden, I realized he was confessing to me.

"It was a different time," Mr. P said. "A bad time. Very bad. It was wrong. But I was young and stupid and full of ideas. Just like you."

Mr. P smiled. He smiled at me. There was a piece of lettuce stuck between his front teeth.

"You know," he said. "I taught your sister, too."

"I know."

"She was the smartest kid I ever had. She was even smarter than you."

I knew my sister was smart. But I'd never heard a teacher say that about her. And I'd never heard anybody say that she was smarter than me. I was happy and jealous at the same time.

My sister, the basement mole rat, was smarter than me?

"Well," I said, "my mom and dad are pretty smart, too, so I guess it runs in the family."

"Your sister wanted to be a writer," Mr. P said.

"Really?" I asked.

I was surprised by that. She'd never said anything about that to me. Or to Mom and Dad. Or to anybody.

"I never heard her say that," I said.

"She was shy about it," Mr. P said. "She always thought people would make fun of her."

"For writing books? People would have thought she was a hero around here. Maybe she could have made movies or something, too. That would have been cool."

"Well, she wasn't shy about the idea of writing books. She was shy about the kind of books she wanted to write."

"What kind of books did she want to write?" I asked.

"You're going to laugh."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

Jeez, we had both turned into seven-year-olds.

"Just tell me," I said.

It was weird that a teacher was telling me things I didn't know about my sister. It made me wonder what else I didn't know about her.

"She wanted to write romance novels."

Of course, I giggled at that idea.

"Hey," Mr. P said. "You weren't supposed to laugh."

"I didn't laugh."

"Yes, you laughed."

"No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did."

"Maybe I laughed a little."

"A little laugh is still a laugh."

And then I laughed for real. A big laugh.