

The Reluctant STORYTELLER

by Art Coulson • illustrated by Hvresse Christie Blair Tiger

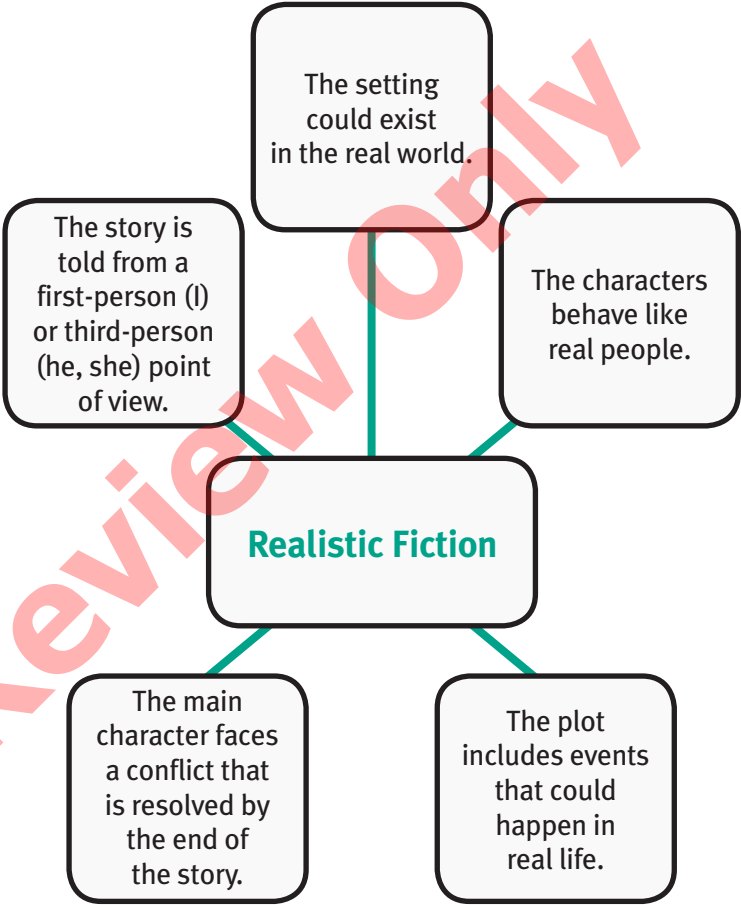


REALISTIC FICTION
LITERATURE

Level	T/50
Lexile®	740L

Realistic Fiction

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The Family Business

Maurice Tenkiller came from a long line of storytellers.

Boy, could they ever talk. His mother once told him that her father, his grandfather, had talked the quills off an angry porcupine in their backyard in Oklahoma.

“That’s how we got possums,” she said.

Maurice’s mom sure could make up stories, just like her father before her.

“Have you ever seen possums running around? They really do look like porcupines without quills,” she used to say. But it was her face that sold the truth. She looked so serious. She didn’t even smile.

Storytelling was the Tenkiller family business, I guess you could say. Maurice’s grandmother, Sally, was known throughout the Midwest for her ghost stories and tales about the old days. Maurice’s uncles, Dynamite and Jack, traveled around the country telling stories at schools and events.

Uncle Dynamite’s real name was Harold. But no one ever called him that, especially once they heard him snore.

Sometimes, when he napped in his chair, it sounded like a mining company was blasting the whole top off a mountain.

No one called Maurice by his given name either, except maybe his teachers on the first day of school.



Everyone knew him as Chooch, which is what his mom and dad had called him from the day he was born. They said it meant “boy” in the language his grandparents had spoken back in Oklahoma.

Chooch was a big boy. He’d gotten a growth spurt over the winter and was now nearly as tall as his uncles.

His shoulders had grown so broad that he was now wearing shirts his father and grandfather used to wear. He wore his hair long, in a single braid down his back.

The Tenkillers—Grandma, Mom, Chooch, and his uncles—lived together in a big old noisy house near Minneapolis, where they had moved years ago for work. His mom was a nurse for the Indian Health Service; his uncles were archaeologists for the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

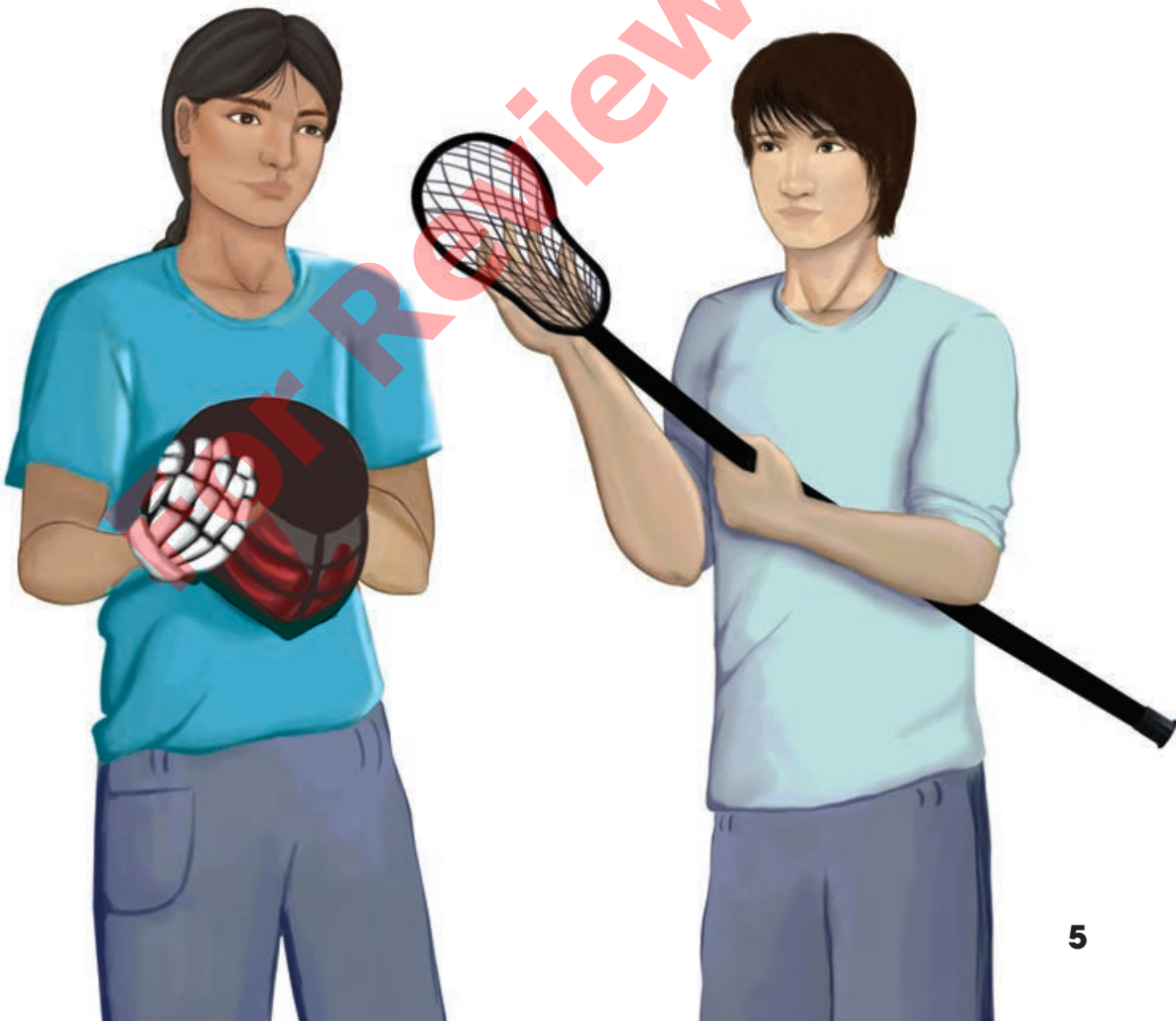
Chooch was standing in the driveway, thinking about spending a whole week with Uncle Dynamite and having to deal with his corny sense of humor, when a sharp crack interrupted his thoughts. A hard rubber ball had just connected with his plastic helmet.

“You gonna catch the ball, Chooch, or stand there goofing off all day?” James Lussier waved his lacrosse stick, trying to get Chooch’s attention.

“I think I’m done for the day,” Chooch said, taking off his gloves and helmet. “My mom’s gonna call me in for dinner any minute now.”

Chooch and James were in the same class at Riverton Middle School and played for the Panthers, the traveling lacrosse team. They had lived next door to each other their whole lives.

Chooch and James—never Jim or Jimmy, always James—were inseparable. Even at night, as they slept in their neighboring houses, they were never more than one hundred feet apart. It had been this way forever.



That's what made Chooch so mad about Uncle Dynamite's plan to drag him halfway across the world to Oklahoma over spring break. Chooch was supposed to play lacrosse with James and the rest of the Panthers in the Twin Cities Native Lacrosse invitational tournament.

And to make matters even worse—if that were possible—his English teacher, Mrs. Masterson, had assigned the class a project to do over spring break: a presentation on family traditions.

It was as if the whole universe hated him.

Chooch just knew everyone expected him to talk about the “family business,” storytelling.

What in the heck would he do for a whole week in Greasy, Oklahoma, population 350? They probably didn't even have Internet or TV there. And lacrosse? Forget about it.

“You'll love Greasy,” Uncle Dynamite said that night, between bites of catfish and mashed potatoes. “You have thousands of cousins there—okay, dozens of cousins,” he said, correcting himself when he saw the look on Chooch's face.



They were traveling back to his family's hometown for the Wild Onion Festival, where Uncle Dynamite and Dynamite's best friend, Zeke Walkingstick, another BIA archaeologist, planned to tell stories.

"I really don't want to go. Do I have to?" Chooch pleaded with his mother and grandmother. "It's as if you all expect me to be just like you, some kind of storyteller who travels everywhere boring people to tears."

Uncle Dynamite grew quiet and looked down at his plate. His mom gave Chooch the look—the mom look that makes someone be quiet in a hurry.

"You will enjoy yourself, whether you believe me or not," Grandma said as she started to clear the table. "There's so much to do—fishing, swimming, playing with your cousins."

"But can I play lacrosse there?"

"Even better—you can play Cherokee stickball, just like the old days," Uncle Dynamite said.

Chooch rolled his eyes.

"May I be excused? I have a lot of homework to do."



Chooch didn't really have any homework. He just wanted to get away from everyone, go up to his room, and text with James. James would understand why he was so upset.

They want me to be a storyteller like them. The family biz.

Chooch ended the text with an eye roll face. He flopped on his bed, kicked off his sneakers, and checked his phone.

Stinks. You should be what you want to be.

James really understood him.

I know, right? No one asks me. They have no idea I want to be a chef.

Chooch sighed.

A what? Like the guy on the ravioli can?

James ended his text with food emojis.

Chooch didn't even smile.



I want to make healthy food and have my own restaurant, but NOW they're making me go to some silly festival with my uncle for spring break. I can't play in the lacrosse tournament.

He sighed again as he waited for his friend's reply.

Stinks.

Sometimes James was a man of few words.

But James understood the idea of a family business.

When his mom and dad had moved the family from Red Lake Reservation to the city, his dad had opened a small auto repair shop. James worked there with his dad, his sister, and his brothers on the weekends. He planned to be a mechanic just like his dad. Or maybe work on race cars or semitrucks. A good mechanic could fix anything.

James had told Chooch many times that he wasn't sure what he'd do if he came from a family of storytellers.

Talk to you later. I have to go to bed. See you when I get back from the trip.

Chooch plugged his phone into the family charging station in the hallway and got ready for bed.

