

## Understanding Sherman Alexie

Sherman Alexie was born on October 7, 1966, in the town of Wellpinit on the 156,000-acre Spokane Indian Reservation in eastern Washington state, a town of approximately one thousand people. Alexie describes the Spokanes as “a Salmon people. Our religions, our cultures, our dancing, our singing—had everything to do with the salmon. We were devastated by the Grand Coulee Dam. It took 7,000 miles of salmon spawning beds from the interior Indians in Washington, Idaho and Montana.”<sup>1</sup> He also credits the establishment of casinos on the reservation for producing an economic turnaround: “On my reservation, there was about 90 percent unemployment before bingo halls and casinos; now it’s about 10 percent.”<sup>2</sup>

Alexie’s father, Sherman Sr., a Coeur d’Alene Indian who occasionally worked as a logger and truck driver, was a heavy drinker who would often abandon the family for days at a time. Alexie’s mother, of Spokane Indian descent, scraped together money by sewing and working as a clerk to support Alexie and his five siblings. Alexie was born with hydrocephalus, “a life-threatening condition marked by an abnormally large amount of cerebrospinal fluid in the cranial cavity.”<sup>3</sup> At six months, he underwent dangerous surgery to correct the hydrocephalus. The doctors did not expect him to survive or, if so, only with severe mental handicaps, but Alexie proved them wrong, although throughout much of his childhood he suffered some severe side

effects from the surgery, including an enlarged skull, seizures, and uncontrollable bed-wetting.

As a result of his physical abnormalities, Alexie was frequently mocked and ostracized by the other children, some of whom called him “The Globe” because of his large head. Alexie found refuge in books and in school, reading every book in the Wellpinit School library by the time he was twelve. Furthermore, he quickly learned the value of humor both as a means of deflecting the abuse from other children and also as a means of personal empowerment. Alexie explains his rationale: “You can’t run as fast or throw or a punch if you’re laughing.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, he would later claim, “Humor is self-defense on the rez. You make people laugh and you disarm them. You sort of sneak up on them. You can say controversial or rowdy things and they’ll listen or laugh.”<sup>5</sup>

Educated mainly in mainstream, predominantly white schools, Alexie has only a rudimentary knowledge of the Spokane language, as his mother believed that he would succeed with proficiency in English and with a mainstream American education. After attending tribal school through eighth grade, Alexie transferred to an all-white high school in Reardon, Washington. While he felt somewhat isolated there as the only Indian student, Alexie adjusted to the new environment well, “becoming a star player on the school’s basketball team, as well as the team captain, class president, and a member of the championship debate team.”<sup>6</sup>

After graduating from high school with honors, Alexie began college at Gonzaga University, a Jesuit school in Spokane, in 1985. The privileged, predominantly white Gonzaga students did not impress Alexie much, nor did the elitist, social environment. Over time, Alexie’s studies deteriorated due to heavy

drinking and, after two years, he dropped out of school. Subsequently, he moved to Seattle, where he worked as a busboy. On his twenty-first birthday, Alexie was robbed at knifepoint and had an epiphany, deciding to change the direction of his life by going back to school, this time at Washington State University.

Although Alexie initially planned on medicine as a career, he found that his frequent fainting in anatomy class was a dubious sign of his possible future as a doctor. Without serious premeditation, he signed up for a poetry-writing workshop with Alex Kuo. In this class, Alexie read his first volume of Native American poetry, *Songs from This Earth on Turtle's Back*. The anthology was eye-opening for Alexie, who recalls, "I opened it up and—oh my gosh—I saw my life in poems and stories for the very first time."<sup>7</sup> Inspired by the poems in the collection, Alexie started writing his own.<sup>8</sup> His instructor, Alex Kuo, was greatly impressed by Alexie's work and encouraged him to pursue writing as a career.

In 1991 Alexie finished his studies and received a bachelor's degree in American Studies from Washington State. After graduation, he briefly worked as an administrator at a Spokane high school while continuing to write and publish poetry. One of the publishers that frequently published Alexie's poems, Hanging Loose Press, agreed to publish a collection of his poetry in 1992 as *The Business of Fancysdancing*. Alexie chose the day on which he learned of its acceptance for publication to stop drinking for good.<sup>9</sup> Also, he received an enormous professional boost when James Kincaid from the *New York Times* gave his book effusive praise, calling Alexie "one of the major lyric voices of our time."<sup>10</sup> Alexie quickly followed *The Business of Fancysdancing* with a small poetry chapbook, *I Would Steal Horses*, published

by Slipstream Press in the same year, and another book of poetry, *First Indian on the Moon* (1993).

After hearing of and/or reading the glowing reviews of his poetry, publishers and literary agents asked Alexie for a fiction manuscript. He had a few stories on reserve, but ended up writing over half of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* “in three months, in between the review and when I submitted the book to agents.”<sup>11</sup> *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award. His follow-up work, the novel *Reservation Blues*, won the Before Columbus Foundation’s American Book Award. After *Reservation Blues* came the novel *Indian Killer* (1996) and a book of poetry, *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996).

In that same year (1996), Alexie was honored by *Granta* magazine as one of the twenty best American novelists under the age of forty. Comically self-deprecating, Alexie downplays the honor, explaining, “It’s because they needed a brown guy.”<sup>12</sup> After the publication of *Indian Killer* and *The Summer of Black Widows*, Alexie changed directions, writing a screenplay loosely based on a few stories in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, most specifically, “This Is What It Means to Say, Phoenix, Arizona.” This screenplay became the feature film *Smoke Signals* (1998), directed by Chris Eyre, a Native American filmmaker. Whereas previous movies (such as *Powwow Highway* and *Navajo Blues*) had focused upon Native Americans and many more had Native Americans playing significant roles (such as *Dances with Wolves*), *Smoke Signals* became, as Alexie explains, “the first feature film written, directed and co-produced by Indians ever to receive a major distribution deal.”<sup>13</sup> The film-making experience took some adjustment for Alexie. “In writing books,” he explains, “I am the Fidel Castro of my world. I

determine everything. In the filmmaking project, I'm more like the senator from Wyoming. So getting used to that took some doing."<sup>14</sup> Still, the end product was a critical success. *Smoke Signals* won the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival in 1998; in addition, it was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize.

In recent years Alexie has returned to fiction and poetry with *One Stick Song* (2000), *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2001), and *Ten Little Indians* (2003). He also wrote, produced, and directed the film *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002), which concerns a trip home to a reservation by a gay Indian poet and his subsequent reevaluation of his childhood and his current identity. Alexie has also perfected his stage persona in poetry readings, becoming an oratorical success, winning the Taos Poetry Circus World Heavyweight Championship three years in a row (2000–2002).

Currently, Alexie lives in Seattle with his wife, Diane, and his two young sons. In an interview conducted in early 2003, Alexie explains how he has grown less attached to ethnic identity, culture, and traditions, disavowing his former claim that “Indians can reside in the city but never live there.”<sup>15</sup> He explains:

I was much more fundamental then [in his earlier writing]. What changed me was September 11th [2001]: I am now desperately trying to let go of the idea of being right, the idea of making decisions based on imaginary tribes. The terrorists were flying planes into the buildings because they thought they were right and they had special knowledge, and we continue to react. And we will be going to war in Iraq soon because we think we have special knowledge—and we don't. We are making these decisions not based on any moral or ethical

choice, but simply on the basis of power and money and ancient traditions that are full of shit, so I am increasingly suspicious of the word “tradition,” whether in political or literary terms.<sup>16</sup>

In the near future, Alexie plans to publish a collection of poetry and a biography of Jimi Hendrix. He is also working on a memoir tracing his family history from his grandfather who died in the Second World War to his own children.

Much of Alexie’s fiction and poetry takes place on the Spokane Indian Reservation where he was born and raised, and he uses recurring characters like the isolated storyteller, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, and the violent and troubled bully, Victor. In that sense, he is like William Faulkner, focusing upon a small geographical locale to explore larger issues. At the same time, Alexie is more of an autobiographical writer than Faulkner is, for unlike the invented Yoknapatawpha County, Alexie’s Spokane reservation is an actual place where he finds a virtually inexhaustible literary wellspring for his writing. As Alexie explains, “Every theme, every story, every tragedy that exists in literature takes place in my little community. Hamlet takes place on my reservation daily. King Lear takes place on my reservation daily. It’s a powerful place. I’m never going to run out of stories.”<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Alexie explains that one of his primary goals is to reach Indian children on the reservation, whom he believes to be mainly influenced by white-dominated popular culture. Toward that end, Alexie often uses references to television shows, movies, and music as a means to capture their attention and to speak in their language.<sup>18</sup> “It’s the cultural currency,” he explains. “Superman means something different to me than it does to a white guy from Ames, Iowa, or New York City or L.A. It’s a way for

us to sit at the same table. I use pop culture like most poets use Latin.”<sup>19</sup> Specifically, Alexie describes television as the contemporary Gutenberg press, maintaining that “TV is the only thing that keeps us vaguely in democracy even if it’s in the hands of the corporate culture.”<sup>20</sup>

Alexie considers himself first and foremost a poet and short-story writer, then a novelist, screenwriter, and filmmaker. “These two things [poetry and short stories] are very natural,” according to Alexie. “It’s like breathing for me. I really have to struggle with novels. If I never had to write another novel again, I’d be happy. I like the contained world.”<sup>21</sup> Working in the motion-picture industry affected Alexie’s literary perspective, making him worry about the accessibility of his writing and its potential for film adaptation. Consequently, after making *Smoke Signals*, he decided only to make movies “in the same way that I write books: all by myself, with all of my inaccessible bullshit, all of my good and bad writing, and most of the soul I have left intact. I’m going to make very cheap movies on video, and manufacture and distribute the videos all by myself, free from as many corporate influences as possible.”<sup>22</sup> To a large extent, this is what he did with his film *The Business of Fancydancing*.

Alexie’s independent, even rebellious spirit is somewhat at odds with his use of ethnic categories. For the most part, he does not seek to tear down or question ethnic boundaries. For him, being Indian is the primary determinant of his identity and defines his writing: “If I write it, it’s an Indian novel. If I wrote about Martians, it would be an Indian novel. If I wrote about the Amish, it would be an Indian novel. That’s who I am.”<sup>23</sup> He criticizes stereotypes of Indians as nature-loving noble savages and implicates what he calls “the corn-pollen, four directions, eagle-feathered school of Native literature.”<sup>24</sup> “You throw in a

couple of birds and four directions and corn pollen,” Alexie explains, “and it’s Native American literature, when it has nothing to do with the day-to-day lives of Indians. I want my literature to concern the daily lives of Indians.”<sup>25</sup> Another of Alexie’s purposes is to rewrite dominant American history, which barely acknowledges the violent colonization and subsequent massacres of Indians by European settlers, because, as Alexie suggests, to do so would severely damage American national identity and pride. “If people start dealing with Indian culture and Indian peoples truthfully in this country,” he argues, “we’re going to have to start dealing with the genocide that happened here. In order to start dealing truthfully with our cultures, they have to start dealing truthfully with that great sin, the original sin of this country, and that’s not going to happen.”<sup>26</sup>

It is important to recognize that Indians are not only indigenous to North America and a colonized people,<sup>27</sup> but they have been stereotyped and categorized by Europeans from their first settlements in the early seventeenth century. As Andrew Macdonald explains, “Since the first encounters of pre-colonial times, Europeans have shaped, changed, and distorted the indigenous people to serve white people’s needs. The very word ‘Indian’ is a conflation of hundreds of tribes, languages, and cultures into one emblematic figure: the Other, the Alien, the generalized Non-European.”<sup>28</sup> While Natives were first codified as savages by European settlers, who claimed land in the name of Manifest Destiny, over time they tended to think of Natives more as noble savages. “Europeans,” William Bevis explains,

have long assumed a serious split between man and nature, and after 1800, they have often preferred nature to man’s works. Lacking respect for their own civilization, when

European whites have imagined a beatific union of “man and nature” they have assumed that the union would look not “human” but “natural”; therefore, they perceived the Indians as living in a “primitive” union of man and nature that was an antithesis of civilization.<sup>29</sup>

This conception of Native Americans as archetypal ecological figures continues to this day. With the development and subsequent spread of “New Age” interests in recent years, an increasing number of non-Natives have sought to appropriate Native ideas. Thereby, a kind of cultural colonialism has developed. Indeed, Jace Weaver and other Indian scholars insist that Natives are still colonized and oppressed by the white majority.<sup>30</sup>

In reality, life on the reservation is far from idyllic. It has been estimated that alcohol and drugs are responsible for more than half of the deaths on reservations.<sup>31</sup> While contemporary Indians do receive government-provided benefits if they have registered as a member of one of the 317 federally recognized tribes, those benefits hardly offset the bleak economic conditions of the reservation. As Jace Weaver explains:

The average yearly income is half the poverty level, and over half of all Natives are unemployed. On some reservations, unemployment runs as high as 85–90 percent. Health statistics chronically rank Natives at or near the bottom. Male life expectancy is forty-four years, and female is forty-seven. . . . The worst part is that these statistics have not changed in thirty years. Substance abuse, suicide, crime, and violence are major problems among both urban and reservation populations.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, Indians are in danger of being subsumed by the white majority as “almost 60 percent of all American Indians

are married to non-Indians.” Only one-quarter of Natives speak a tribal language, and one-third have no tribal affiliation.<sup>33</sup>

Despite these seemingly bleak statistics, Indians have maintained rich oral traditions over the years. Still, European settlers were not aware of or concerned with Indian culture when they settled the country, and consistently, in colonial through nineteenth-century American literature, from Mary Rowlandson to Nathaniel Hawthorne and Mark Twain, Indians often appeared as uncivilized, demonic figures or, at best—in the work of James Fenimore Cooper—as noble savages.

Yet the twentieth century brought significant changes to the conceptions of Natives by Europeans. “The Great Depression,” Norma Wilson explains,

initiated an unprecedented interest in Native American culture and literature, as readers looked for enduring philosophies and lifestyles more in harmony with the land. The Civil Rights Movement inspired America’s indigenous peoples, and by the late 1960s they had begun reasserting their sovereignty rights and producing a significant body of literature.<sup>34</sup>

It is generally thought that a Native American literary renaissance began in the late 1960s, with the publication of N. Scott Momaday’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *House Made of Dawn* (1968), an account of a tortured war veteran, Abel, who is caught between the reservation and urban worlds. Momaday was quickly followed by critically acclaimed writers like James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, Gerald Vizenor, and Louise Erdrich.

There are some general differences between Native American fiction and mainstream European or American fiction. William Bevis claims that such canonical Western novels as *Moby-Dick*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry*

*Finn*, and *The Great Gatsby* contain plots based upon leaving, escape, or discovery, in which “the individual advances, sometimes at all costs, with little or no regard for family, society, past, or place. The individual is the ultimate reality, hence individual consciousness is the medium, repository, and arbiter of knowledge.”<sup>35</sup> In contrast to the typical Western plot, Bevis argues that in a typical Native American work, the protagonist “recoils from a white world in which the mobile Indian individual finds no meaning and as if by instinct, comes home. . . . This ‘homing’ cannot be judged by white standards of individuality; it must be read in the tribal context.”<sup>36</sup>

Many of today’s most successful Indian writers, including Alexie, find themselves caught between mainstream American life and reservation life. As James Ruppert explains, “Native American writers write for two audiences—non-Native and Native American—or in many cases three audiences—a local, a pan-tribal one and a non-Native contemporary American one. The attempt to satisfy those audiences generates the peculiar construct of their art.”<sup>37</sup> Alexie, a member of “Generation X” and younger than his precursors Momaday, Welch, and Silko, faces a greater challenge: how to write about Indians in a predominantly televisual country.

One way that Alexie and many other Indian writers disrupt colonial influences is by playing the role of a trickster, an important figure in many Native cultures. While the role of the trickster varies from tribe to tribe, he generally “has a familiar set of characteristics: he plays tricks and is the victim of tricks; he is amoral and has strong appetites, particularly for food and sex; he is footloose, irresponsible and callous, but somehow always sympathetic if not lovable.”<sup>38</sup> Gerald Vizenor calls the trickster an “androgynous, comic healer and liberator in literature,”<sup>39</sup>

while Jace Weaver claims that Indian writers adopt the role of the trickster by adopting “a multiplicity of styles and forms to suit their purposes.”<sup>40</sup>

Most contemporary American indigenous authors began by writing poetry.<sup>41</sup> Some have compared Native American poetry to English romantic poetry,<sup>42</sup> although that is a narrow generalization. Similar to early African American communities, “America’s indigenous nations created songs to accompany every aspect of their lives—healing, hunting, planting, grinding corn, making poetry, dying, loving, making war.”<sup>43</sup> Indian poetry is primarily oral, de-emphasizes rhyme, uses humor, and often focuses on the tribe and environment and upon the sacred and mystical. That the number of Native American poets has dramatically increased since the 1960s shows that more Indians have become interested in writing poetry and, presumably, that their audience has grown as well.

There are some general distinctions that can be made between Native American and Western or mainstream American perspectives. Traditionally, most Indian cultures believe in the sanctity of words, which, in the form of poems or stories, are thought to possess a life and power independent of the narrator. In “The Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations,” Jerry Mander characterizes American society as hierarchical, materialistic, patriarchal, and ecologically unsound. In contrast, he views Indian cultures as nature-oriented, nonhierarchical, matriarchal, and spiritual. Vine Deloria Jr., a preeminent Native essayist, argues that the landscape plays a crucial role in Native American religion, identity, and, by consequence, literature. Their spatial organization, he argues, lies in marked contrast to the more temporal organization of Westerners. Echoing Deloria, Raymond Fogelson writes:

“The idea that land was property that could be exclusively possessed, expropriated, or alienated was foreign to native North America.”<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, it has been argued that Native Americans typically have a more cyclical view of time and life rather than a more linear view.<sup>45</sup> Also, a crucial hallmark of Native culture is thought to be the “relationship of human beings to all other forms of existence in a vast web of cosmic interrelationship in which humans stand at the bottom or on the periphery.”<sup>46</sup> While Native tribes tend to believe in a creator or creators, they rarely think of a singular deity with whom they could communicate, as do many Christians. For others, such as Cherokee writer Thomas King, community is the central feature of Native culture.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Jace Weaver argues that Native American literature is most defined by “communitism,” a “combination of community and activism.”<sup>48</sup> While some writers like King believe that the conversion of Indians to Western religions has led to a deterioration of Native culture, community, and beliefs, Alexie is more ambivalent about the influence of Western religions upon Indians. While Alexie tends to criticize the deleterious influence of Catholicism and Christianity upon Native Americans, he considers the Jesuits more praiseworthy. “I love Jesuits,” he explains. “They are the rock ’n’ roll stars of the Catholic church. I love their mysticism, their social and economic politics. I love their poetic streak and their rebelliousness.” Alexie admits, “I still am heavily Catholic- and Christian-influenced.”<sup>49</sup>

In recent years, with the New Age movement, there has been an increase in interest in virtually all things deemed to be Native American or created by Natives. “Today,” as Andrew Macdonald proposes,

mainstream America’s sense of a lost past, an unrealized potential, and a life more in tune with the rhythms of the

Earth leads some to look back to pre-Columbian America and the Indians of that period as a lost utopia, a better world than the one we have created, or to see in the past the seeds of destruction that have swept away so many nations and cultures, and will sweep away so many more in the future.<sup>50</sup>

Alexie and many other Native authors regard the New Age movement with suspicion, viewing it as a misguided attempt on the part of white people to usurp Native culture largely for their own selfish purposes. Along similar lines, Alexie refuses to submit to mainstream standards for a watered-down, romanticized version of Native American literature. He is determined to remain fiercely independent, without catering to any specific audience, except in his desire to help his audience think about the issues he writes about, even if his positions on those issues are radical, disturbing, and confrontational. “I’ve come to the realization,” he maintains, “that many people have been reading literary fiction for the same reason they read mainstream fiction: for entertainment and a form of escape. I don’t want to write books that provide people with that. I want books that challenge, anger, and possibly offend.”<sup>51</sup>