

SHERMAN ALEXIE

SHERMAN ALEXIE is a poet, fiction writer, and filmmaker known for witty and frank explorations of the lives of contemporary Native Americans. A Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, Alexie was born in 1966 and grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. He spent two years at Gonzaga University before transferring to Washington State University in Pullman. The same year he graduated, 1991, Alexie published *The Business of Fancydancing*, a book of poetry that led the *New York Times Book Review* to call him "one of the major lyric voices of our time." Since then Alexie has published many more books of poetry, including *I Would Steal Horses* (1993) and *One Stick Song* (2000); the novels *Reservation Blues* (1995) and *Indian Killer* (1996); and the story collections *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000), and *Ten Little Indians* (2003). Alexie also wrote and produced *Smoke Signals*, a film that won awards at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival, and he wrote and directed *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002), a film about the paths of two young men from the Spokane reservation. Living in Seattle with his wife and children, Alexie occasionally performs as a stand-up comic and holds the record for the most consecutive years as World Heavyweight Poetry Bout Champion.

Indian Education

Alexie attended the tribal school on the Spokane reservation through the seventh grade, when he decided to seek a better education at an off-reservation all-white high school. As this year-by-year account of his schooling makes clear, he was not firmly at home in either setting. The essay first appeared in Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.

First Grade

My hair was too short and my US Government glasses were horn-rimmed, 1
ugly, and all that first winter in school, the other Indian boys chased me from
one corner of the playground to the other. They pushed me down, buried me
in the snow until I couldn't breathe, thought I'd never breathe again.

They stole my glasses and threw them over my head, around my out- 2
stretched hands, just beyond my reach, until someone tripped me and sent me
falling again, facedown in the snow.

I was always falling down; my Indian name was Junior Falls Down. Some- 3
times it was Bloody Nose or Steal-His-Lunch. Once, it was Cries-Like-a-
White-Boy, even though none of us had seen a white boy cry.

Then it was a Friday morning recess and Frenchy SiJohn threw snowballs 4
at me while the rest of the Indian boys tortured some other *top-yogh-yaught*

kid, another weakling. But Frenchy was confident enough to torment me all by himself, and most days I would have let him.

But the little warrior in me roared to life that day and knocked Frenchy to the ground, held his head against the snow, and punched him so hard that my knuckles and the snow made symmetrical bruises on his face. He almost looked like he was wearing war paint.

But he wasn't the warrior. I was. And I chanted *It's a good day to die, it's a good day to die*, all the way down to the principal's office.

Second Grade

Betty Towle, missionary teacher, redheaded and so ugly that no one ever had a puppy crush on her, made me stay in for recess fourteen days straight.

"Tell me you're sorry," she said.

"Sorry for what?" I asked.

"Everything," she said and made me stand straight for fifteen minutes, eagle-armed with books in each hand. One was a math book; the other was English. But all I learned was that gravity can be painful.

For Halloween I drew a picture of her riding a broom with a scrawny cat on the back. She said that her God would never forgive me for that.

Once, she gave the class a spelling test but set me aside and gave me a test designed for junior high students. When I spelled all the words right, she crumpled up the paper and made me eat it.

"You'll learn respect," she said.

She sent a letter home with me that told my parents to either cut my braids or keep me home from class. My parents came in the next day and dragged their braids across Betty Towle's desk.

"Indians, indians, indians." She said it without capitalization. She called me "indian, indian, indian."

And I said, *Yes, I am. I am Indian. Indian, I am.*

Third Grade

My traditional Native American art career began and ended with my very first portrait: *Stick Indian Taking a Piss in My Backyard*.

As I circulated the original print around the classroom, Mrs. Schluter intercepted and confiscated my art.

Censorship, I might cry now. *Freedom of expression*, I would write in editorials to the tribal newspaper.

In third grade, though, I stood alone in the corner, faced the wall, and waited for the punishment to end.

I'm still waiting.

Fourth Grade

"You should be a doctor when you grow up," Mr. Schluter told me, even though his wife, the third grade teacher, thought I was crazy beyond my years. My eyes always looked like I had just hit-and-run someone. 22

"Guilty," she said. "You always look guilty." 23

"Why should I be a doctor?" I asked Mr. Schluter. 24

"So you can come back and help the tribe. So you can heal people." 25

That was the year my father drank a gallon of vodka a day and the same year that my mother started two hundred different quilts but never finished any. They sat in separate, dark places in our HUD¹ house and wept savagely. 26

I ran home after school, heard their Indian tears, and looked in the mirror. *Doctor Victor*, I called myself, invented an education, talked to my reflection. *Doctor Victor to the emergency room.* 27

Fifth Grade

I picked up a basketball for the first time and made my first shot. No. I missed my first shot, missed the basket completely, and the ball landed in the dirt and sawdust, sat there just like I had sat there only minutes before. 28

But it felt good, that ball in my hands, all those possibilities and angles. It was mathematics, geometry. It was beautiful. 29

At that same moment, my cousin Steven Ford sniffed rubber cement from a paper bag and leaned back on the merry-go-round. His ears rang, his mouth was dry, and everyone seemed so far away. 30

But it felt good, that buzz in his head, all those colors and noises. It was chemistry, biology. It was beautiful. 31

Oh, do you remember those sweet, almost innocent choices that the Indian boys were forced to make? 32

Sixth Grade

Randy, the new Indian kid from the white town of Springdale, got into a fight an hour after he first walked into the reservation school. 33

Stevie Flett called him out, called him a squawman, called him a pussy, and called him a punk. 34

Randy and Stevie, and the rest of the Indian boys, walked out into the playground. 35

¹Housing and Urban Development, a US government department. — EDS.

"Throw the first punch," Stevie said as they squared off. 36
 "No," Randy said. 37
 "Throw the first punch," Stevie said again. 38
 "No," Randy said again. 39
 "Throw the first punch!" Stevie said for the third time, and Randy reared 40
 back and pitched a knuckle fastball that broke Stevie's nose.
 We all stood there in silence, in awe. 41
 That was Randy, my soon-to-be first and best friend, who taught me the 42
 most valuable lesson about living in the white world: *Always throw the first*
punch.

Seventh Grade

I leaned through the basement window of the HUD house and kissed the 43
 white girl who would later be raped by her foster-parent father, who was also
 white. They both lived on the reservation, though, and when the headlines
 and stories filled the papers later, not one word was made of their color.
Just Indians being Indians, someone must have said somewhere and they 44
 were wrong.
 But on the day I leaned through the basement window of the HUD 45
 house and kissed the white girl, I felt the good-byes I was saying to my entire
 tribe. I held my lips tight against her lips, a dry, clumsy, and ultimately stu-
 pid kiss.
 But I was saying good-bye to my tribe, to all the Indian girls and women I 46
 might have loved, to all the Indian men who might have called me cousin,
 even brother.
 I kissed that white girl and when I opened my eyes, she was gone from the 47
 reservation, and when I opened my eyes, I was gone from the reservation, liv-
 ing in a farm town where a beautiful white girl asked my name.
 "Junior Polatkin," I said, and she laughed. 48
 After that, no one spoke to me for another five hundred years. 49

Eighth Grade

At the farm town junior high, in the boys' bathroom, I could hear voices 50
 from the girls' bathroom, nervous whispers of anorexia and bulimia. I could
 hear the white girls' forced vomiting, a sound so familiar and natural to me
 after years of listening to my father's hangovers.
 "Give me your lunch if you're just going to throw it up," I said to one of 51
 those girls once.
 I sat back and watched them grow skinny from self-pity. 52

Back on the reservation, my mother stood in line to get us commodities. 53
We carried them home, happy to have food, and opened the canned beef that
even the dogs wouldn't eat.

But we ate it day after day and grew skinny from self-pity. 54

There is more than one way to starve. 55

Ninth Grade

At the farm town high school dance, after a basketball game in an over- 56
heated gym where I had scored twenty-seven points and pulled down thirteen
rebounds, I passed out during a slow song.

As my white friends revived me and prepared to take me to the emergency 57
room where doctors would later diagnose my diabetes, the Chicano teacher
ran up to us.

"Hey," he said. "What's that boy been drinking? I know all about these 58
Indian kids. They start drinking real young."

Sharing dark skin doesn't necessarily make two men brothers. 59

Tenth Grade

I passed the written test easily and nearly flunked the driving, but still 60
received my Washington State driver's license on the same day that Wally Jim
killed himself by driving his car into a pine tree.

No traces of alcohol in his blood, good job, wife and two kids. 61

"Why'd he do it?" asked a white Washington State trooper. 62

All the Indians shrugged their shoulders, looked down at the ground. 63

"Don't know," we all said, but when we look in the mirror, see the history 64
of our tribe in our eyes, taste failure in the tap water, and shake with old tears,
we understand completely.

Believe me, everything looks like a noose if you stare at it long enough. 65

Eleventh Grade

Last night I missed two free throws which would have won the game 66
against the best team in the state. The farm town high school I play for is
nicknamed the "Indians," and I'm probably the only actual Indian ever to play
for a team with such a mascot.

This morning I pick up the sports page and read the headline: INDIANS
LOSE AGAIN. 67

Go ahead and tell me none of this is supposed to hurt me very much. 68

Twelfth Grade

I walk down the aisle, valedictorian of this farm town high school, and my
cap doesn't fit because I've grown my hair longer than it's ever been. Later, I
stand as the school-board chairman recites my awards, accomplishments, and
scholarships. 69

I try to remain stoic for the photographers as I look toward the future. 70

Back home on the reservation, my former classmates graduate: a few can't
read, one or two are just given attendance diplomas, most look forward to the
parties. The bright students are shaken, frightened, because they don't know
what comes next. 71

They smile for the photographer as they look back toward tradition. 72

The tribal newspaper runs my photograph and the photograph of my for-
mer classmates side by side. 73

Postscript: Class Reunion

Victor said, "Why should we organize a reservation high school reunion?
My graduating class has a reunion every weekend at the Powwow Tavern." 74

*For a reading quiz, sources on Sherman Alexie, and annotated links to further
readings on Native American education and reservation life, visit bedfordstmartins.com/thebedfordreader.*

Journal Writing

Alexie mingles positive and negative school experiences, each seeming almost to
grow out of the other. Write down some of your own memorable school experiences,
positive or negative. Which kind of memories seem to dominate? Are the experi-
ences connected? (To take your journal writing further, see "From Journal to Essay" on
p. 112.)

Questions on Meaning

1. What overall impression does Alexie create of life on the reservation? Point to specific **EXAMPLES** in the text that contribute to this impression.
2. Notice those places in the essay where Alexie describes how Native Americans face prejudice and negative stereotyping. What does this focus suggest about his **PURPOSE**?
3. The title "Indian Education" refers here to more than just formal schooling. What are some other implications of the title?
4. Alexie refers to his hair in the opening sentence of the essay and in the sections on second grade and twelfth grade. How, and of what, is his hair a **SYMBOL**?

Questions on Writing Strategy

1. In this essay Alexie offers thirteen scenes: one for each school grade and a postscript reunion. Why do you think he set these scenes up in separate sections and labeled them with headings, instead of, say, running the sections together and introducing each with a phrase like "During first grade" or "When I was in second grade"? What is the **EFFECT** of Alexie's narrative technique?
2. Each section of the essay ends with a brief paragraph, usually a single sentence. What common function do all of these conclusions perform? How do their functions vary, and why?
3. How does the section on the seventh grade, almost exactly in the middle of the essay, serve as a thematic **TRANSITION**?
4. Why do you think Alexie ends with the section "Postscript: Class Reunion"? What is the effect of this final image?
5. **OTHER METHODS.** At several points in the essay, Alexie uses **COMPARISON AND CONTRAST**. Locate at least two examples, and explain what each contributes to the essay.

Questions on Language

1. In paragraph 15 Alexie writes that his teacher said of him and his parents "Indians, indians, indians' . . . without capitalization." What is his point?
2. At the end of the seventh grade section (par. 49), Alexie writes that "no one spoke to me for another five hundred years." What does he mean? What is the effect of this hyperbole? (See *Figures of speech* in Useful Terms if you need a definition of *hyperbole*.)
3. Describe the **IRONY** in paragraphs 67 and 68.
4. Notice the similarities between the pairs of sentences composing paragraphs 29 and 31 and paragraphs 70 and 72. What point does Alexie make with the similarities?
5. If any of the following words are unfamiliar, be sure to look them up in a dictionary: horn-rimmed (par. 1); symmetrical (5); scrawny (11); circulated, intercepted, confiscated (18); ultimately (45); anorexia, bulimia (50); commodities (53); diabetes (57); valedictorian (69).

Suggestions for Writing

1. **FROM JOURNAL TO ESSAY.** Write an essay about a particularly memorable aspect of your life as a student, whether positive, negative, or a mix of both. You might focus on a single event, a series of events over years, or perhaps an entire school year. As you relate your story, try to give your personal experience meaning for your readers.
2. Using Alexie's essay as a model, write an essay about significant moments that occurred in your life and that had in common a challenge or a struggle or an achievement that is or was important to you. You need not organize according to school years, nor need the events be school related. Do make sure that the common theme in the events and the significance of each event is clear to readers.
3. One of Alexie's underlying themes in this essay is the difficulties Native Americans often face on reservations. Do some research about the conditions of reservation life. Then write an essay in which you report your findings.
4. **CRITICAL WRITING.** Alexie is well known for injecting humor, sometimes very dark humor, into tales that might otherwise be unrelievedly bleak. Where do you see humor in "Indian Education"? Who or what, if anything, does Alexie poke fun at? How effective is the humor? Write an essay analyzing Alexie's use of humor, focusing your analysis on a single central idea of your own and supporting it with plenty of examples from Alexie's essay.
5. **CONNECTIONS.** Like Alexie's "Indian Education," Maya Angelou's "Champion of the World" (p. 88) and Amy Tan's "Fish Cheeks" (p. 94) also report experiences of being culturally and racially different from mainstream white America. Earlier "Connections" writing topics ask you to compare and contrast Angelou's and Tan's perceptions of what sets them apart from the dominant culture (p. 92) or their uses of narration to convey their differing POINTS OF VIEW (p. 97). Now bring Alexie into one of these comparisons with Angelou or Tan or both. Be sure to use examples from the essays to support your main idea.

Sherman Alexie on Writing

The humor woven into his work sometimes surprises first-time readers of Sherman Alexie. "One of the biggest misconceptions about Indians is that we're stoic," Alexie told Pam Lambert of *People Weekly*. "But humor is an essential part of our culture." The humor in Alexie's writing reflects its role in the lives of contemporary Native Americans, for whom, Alexie told Doug Marx of *Publishers Weekly*, "laughter is a ceremony. It's the way people cope."

Alexie does not avoid depicting the poverty, alcoholism, and despair faced by many Indians. Sometimes criticized by other Indians for portraying reservation life as hopeless, Alexie responded to Doug Marx: "I write what I know and I don't try to mythologize myself, which is what some seem to want,

and which some Indian women and men writers are doing, this Earth Mother and Shaman Man thing, trying to create these 'authentic, traditional' Indians. We don't live our lives that way."

Alexie believes that as an American Indian writer he has a special responsibility "to tell the truth," as he put it to E. K. Caldwell in another interview. But, he continued, "Part of the danger in being an artist of whatever color is that you fall in love with your wrinkles. The danger is that if you fall in love with your wrinkles then you don't want to get rid of them. You start to glorify them and perpetuate them. If you write about pain, you can end up searching for more pain to write about, that kind of thing, that self-destructive route. We need to get away from that. We can write about pain and anger without having it consume us."

Alexie doesn't mind being typecast as a Native American writer. Speaking to Joel McNally of *The Writer* magazine, Alexie said, "If you object to being defined by your race and culture, you are saying there is something wrong with writing about your race and your culture. I'm not going to let others define me. . . . 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."

For Discussion

1. What do you think Alexie means by the "Earth Mother and Shaman Man thing" that he disparages in the work of some Indian writers? Why does he disapprove of it?
2. Judging from his essay "Indian Education," how would you say Alexie follows his own advice to "write about the pain and anger without having it consume us"?