

## Topic Page: [Alexie, Sherman, 1966-](#)

Summary Article: **Sherman Alexie (b.1966)**

From *Blackwell Guides to Literature: The Twentieth-Century American Fiction Handbook*

Sherman Alexie writes in a number of genres, sometimes within the same volume. His work includes poetry – in both free and formal verse – short stories, novels, essays, songs, and screenplays. He has won poetry slam competitions, has performed as a stand-up comedian, and has directed one of his screenplays. Alexie is of Spokane and Coeur d’Alene descent, and his work reflects this Native American background (Alexie prefers the word “Indian” in his writing). His themes include isolation, alcoholism, domestic violence, and the oppression, stereotyping, and general mistreatment of Native Americans and their heritage by the dominant culture – particularly in popular films, television series, songs, and sports. Contemporary consumer culture infiltrates the world of his characters, although they usually have little money. The setting of the earlier fiction is usually the Spokane Reservation, in Washington State, while the later narratives are more often set in Seattle.

Alexie was born on the Spokane Reservation and was educated there until he began attending the white high school in nearby Reardan. He attended Gonzaga University from 1985 to 1987, and Washington State University in Pullman from 1988 to 1991. Alcoholism seriously impaired his college work, and although he managed to conquer his drinking problem in 1992, he did not receive his degree until 1995. Such was his early success that he was awarded an Alumni Achievement Award along with his BA. In this same year, 1995, Alexie married his wife, Diane.

At Washington State Alexie took a creative writing class with Chinese American author Alex Kuo, who became an important mentor. Shortly after finishing college he received two Fellowships: a Washington State Arts Commission Poetry Fellowship in 1991 and a National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowship in 1992. He then made a remarkable debut, publishing four books in two years. One of them, *The Business of Fancysdancing*, was singled out as a *New York Times* “Notable Book of the Year,” and another, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, is frequently taught in contemporary literature courses.

When *The Business of Fancysdancing* (1992) was published by Brooklyn’s Hanging Loose Press, a number of its poems and stories had already appeared in various journals and magazines. Alex Kuo’s introduction to the collection characterizes Alexie’s work as having “escaped the pervasive influence of writing workshops, academic institutions and their subsidized intellect.” In what is generally considered Alexie’s bleakest book, there is little possibility of escape from the world of alcoholism, subsidized housing, poor nutrition, racist tribal police, and “Crazy Horse Dreams” – escapist fantasies that offer a form of release for a short while. In the title poem, fancysdancing is a money-raising “business” performed to win prize money for drink. The book’s longest story, “Special Delivery,” illustrates the role of imagination and humor in the attempts to survive the violence, drunkenness, and dead-end boredom of reservation life. Thomas Builds-the-Fire, the central figure in this story – a storyteller who can find no audience – is one of the recurring characters in Alexie’s work.

*Old Shirts & New Skins* (1993) and *First Indian on the Moon* (1993) also mix poetry and prose genres, and continue the depiction of a native culture reduced, isolated, rootless, and crudely co-opted by Hollywood and television. In “My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys,” for example, the cowboys’ six-shooters never need reloading, God looks like John Wayne, and in Westerns the Indians are always

extras.

All four of these early books illustrate what continue to be major characteristics of Alexie's writing: humor, directness, and surprising turns and juxtapositions of language and incident. Of the four, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), Alexie's first publication by a major commercial press, did most to establish his reputation. The book won the PEN-Hemingway Award for best first book of fiction. In his introduction to the 2005 reissue, which adds two new stories, Alexie describes the impact of the prominent positive review given *The Business of Fancydancing* in the *New York Times*. He was beset by agents and producers looking to turn him into a more commercial writer and seeking to cash in on his moment of fame. In the introduction he acknowledges that the stories are bleaker than those in his later work – "reservation realism" is his term for their approach – and he concedes the autobiographical elements that he had earlier minimized. This introduction is written with the same kind of dry, sometimes bitter, humor that enters the stories, humor that helps the characters to fight off boredom, and to live with violence, loss, and alcoholism. The narratives' unexpected turns often take the form of stories within stories, memories that form a bridge with the main narrative and add to the story's culminating action, or inaction. The title story's various narrative levels, for example, include a 3 a.m. visit to a convenience store, a troubled relationship with a now lost girlfriend, bored joblessness, and a basketball game.

One of the stories in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona" – in which storyteller Thomas drives with Victor to collect the ashes of Victor's father – became the basis of the film *Smoke Signals* (1998), for which Alexie wrote the screenplay. The film was made with an all-Native American cast and crew, and won numerous awards, including two from the Sundance Film Festival. Alexie's other film work includes writing and directing the 2002 film *The Business of Fancydancing*, and writing the short film *49?* (2003), which documents an Indian chant style.

Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire are among a number of characters who reappear from Alexie's earlier books in his first novel, *Reservation Blues* (1995). The story concerns the Indian rock band Coyote Springs and their difficulties getting a recording contract in the white music industry. Reaction to the novel has tended to recognize the power of its individual stories, while suggesting that they don't fully sustain the larger narrative structure of the book or fully integrate the mythic and historical material into the contemporary story. Alexie's second novel, *Indian Killer* (1996), a murder mystery, also met with some qualified reviews. The novel is set in Seattle and follows three Indians living in the city (including Alexie's most fully developed female character, Marie Polatkin) at a time when a serial killer is loose. The murders are of white men, and the police suspect that the killer is an Indian. The novel contains some sharp satire on those whites who write, edit, or teach Indian materials while having little knowledge of Indian life beyond popular stereotypes or secondhand knowledge.

Following these two novels, Alexie published a number of books of poems, and two further books of stories – *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000) and *Ten Little Indians* (2003). In reviewing the former, Joyce Carol Oates drew attention to Alexie's position outside of more mainstream Native American writing: Alexie is "the bad boy," she writes, "mocking, self-mocking, unpredictable, unassimilable." The first of these collections continues Alexie's exploration of compromised heritage and identity. The stories are contemporary but the problems go back generations, exacerbated by dead-end work, violence, and stereotyping. The only release, as in the title story, is a tentative communal suffering, and a return to the reservation is both a comfort and a defeat. In *Ten Little Indians*

the central characters are more likely to be successful professionals, trying to make their way outside the reservation, but always in the midst of a white world in which an Indian might be told on the street by a stranger, with no sense of the irony, to go on back to his own country.

*Flight* (2007), Alexie's first novel for more than 10 years, is an ambitious and fast-paced story of 15-year-old half-Indian Zits – his name coming from the pimples on his face – whose anger and frustration lead him to plan an act of mass murder. But in the midst of the shooting he is transported back in time to some key moments in American history, including the Battle of Little Big Horn just before Custer's arrival, and into the body of a flight trainer unknowingly preparing one of the 9/11 terrorists. His time travel shows him perspectives beyond the merely violent, perspectives that invite tolerance rather than rage, and that involve a broader sense of community.

Some reviewers categorized *Flight* as young adult fiction, while recognizing its adult themes, but Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), published the same year, with cartoons by Ellen Forney, is his first novel explicitly for that age group, and won its author the National Book Award for Young People's Literature. "I think the world is a series of broken dams and floods," writes narrator Arnold Spirit Jr., "and my cartoons are tiny little lifeboats." Frankly autobiographical, the story of Arnold's demoralizing experience in the reservation school, his transfer to the nearby white school (where he is the only Indian apart from the mascot) and the problems and opportunities it brings him, is told with an economy and humor that for some readers makes it Alexie's best work to date in an oeuvre that, with its author barely 40, already includes more than 17 books.

## Bibliography

Sherman Alexie's novels and story collections are available in paperback format.

- Cox, James, "Muting White Noise: The Subversion of Popular Culture Narratives in Sherman Alexie's Fiction," in *Studies in American Indian Literature* 9.4 (1997), 52-70.
- Grassian, Daniel, *Understanding Sherman Alexie* (Columbia, SC, 2005).
- Krupat, Arnold, "The 'Rage Stage': Contextualizing Sherman Alexie's Indian Killer," in *Red Matters: Native American Studies* (Philadelphia, 2002), pp. 98-121.
- Moore, David L., "Sherman Alexie: Irony, Intimacy, and Agency," in *Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature*, ed. Porter, Joy and Roemer, Kenneth M. (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 297-310.

### APA

### Chicago

### Harvard

### MLA

---

Sherman Alexie (B.1966). (2010). In C. MacGowan, *Blackwell guides to literature: the twentieth-century American fiction handbook*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. Retrieved from [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/alexie\\_sherman\\_1966](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/alexie_sherman_1966)

---



## APA

Sherman Alexie (B.1966). (2010). In C. MacGowan, *Blackwell guides to literature: the twentieth-century American fiction handbook*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. Retrieved from [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/alexie\\_sherman\\_1966](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/alexie_sherman_1966)

## Chicago

"Sherman Alexie (b.1966)." In *Blackwell Guides to Literature: The Twentieth-Century American Fiction Handbook*, by Christopher MacGowan. Wiley, 2010. [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/alexie\\_sherman\\_1966](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/alexie_sherman_1966)

## Harvard

Sherman Alexie (B.1966). (2010). In C. MacGowan, *Blackwell guides to literature: the twentieth-century American fiction handbook*. [Online]. Hoboken: Wiley. Available from: [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/alexie\\_sherman\\_1966](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/alexie_sherman_1966) [Accessed 21 October 2019].

## MLA

"Sherman Alexie (b.1966)." *Blackwell Guides to Literature: The Twentieth-Century American Fiction Handbook*, Christopher MacGowan, Wiley, 1st edition, 2010. *Credo Reference*, [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/alexie\\_sherman\\_1966](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/alexie_sherman_1966). Accessed 21 Oct. 2019.