AN INTERVIEW WITH SHERMAN ALEXIE

CONDUCTED BY CLAIRE MIKALSON
FEATURING QUESTIONS FROM LANDSCAPES CONTRIBUTORS

PRAISE FOR SHERMAN ALEXIE'S LATEST WORK THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE DIARY OF A PART-TIME INDIAN

"For 15 years now, Sherman Alexie has explored the struggle to survive between the grinding plates of the Indian and white worlds. He's done it through various characters and genres, but The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian may be his best work yet."—The New York Times Book Review

"The Absolute True Diary... is ultimately neither depressing nor disturbing. It's honest. And funny. And wonderfully memorable... Alexie tells Arnold's (and parts of his own) story with enough humility and humor to save it from the weight of its own themes and make of it something meaningful, sincere, and greatly entertaining. Put this into the hands of a high school boy and odds are you'll find him actually reading it, and no doubt enjoying it too."—Publishers Weekly
BIOGRAPHY

Sherman Alexie is a Spokane/Coeur d’Alene Indian from Wellpinit, Washington, a town on the Spokane Indian reservation. He has published ten books of poetry including The Business of Fancydancing and, most recently, Dangerous Astronomy. Alexie’s first collection of short stories, The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, was a citation winner for the PEN/Hemingway Award for Best First Fiction. Alexie’s first novel, Reservation Blues, was selected as a Booklist Editor’s Choice Award for Fiction and was awarded an American Book Award from The Before Columbus Foundation in 1996. His novel Indian Killer was a New York Times Notable Book. Alexie’s second short story collection, The Toughest Indian in the World, earned him the 2001 PEN/Malamud Award for short fiction. His most recent short story collection, Ten Little Indians, was a finalist for the 2003 Los Angeles Times Book Prize in Fiction. His most recent novels include Flight and The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, his first young adult novel, which won the 2007 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature. He has served as a member of the Independent Spirit Awards Nominating Committee, and as a creative advisor to the Sundance Institute Writers Fellowship Program. Currently he resides in Seattle, Washington, with his wife and two sons.

HONORS AND AWARDS

2007 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature
2007 Western Literature Association Distinguished Achievement Award
2005 Pushcart Prize for poem “Avian Nights,” published in Dangerous Astronomy
2003 The Regents’ Distinguished Alumnus Award, Washington State University
2001 PEN/Malamud Award, from the PEN/Faulkner Foundation
2000 Honoray Degree from Seattle University
1999 Honoray Degree from Columbia College, Chicago
1999 The New Yorker: 20 Writers for the 21st Century
1998 Tacoma Public Library Annual Literary Award
1996 Granta Magazine: Twenty Best American Novelists Under the Age of 40
1995 Chad Walsh Poetry Award
1994 Washington State University Distinguished Alumni Award
1994 Lila Wallace-Readers Digest Writers’ Award
1993 Ernest Hemingway Foundation Award Citation
1992 National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowship
1991 Washington State Arts Commission Poetry Fellowship
LE: Currently a rumor is circling amongst readers of your work here at WSU. Apparently you are planning on returning to WSU soon, but this time as a teacher. Is there any validity in the rumor? If you taught a class what would be the curriculum and required texts?

SA: Amelia Earhart and I will be teaching avionics, along with Big Foot, Jimmy Hoffa, and the Grand Duchess Anastasia of Russia. Seriously, no. I am teaching two classes at the University of Washington in American Ethnic Studies—literature and film.

LE: Poetry is believed to be a form of “free” creation to which all have access despite their age, class, race, sexuality, etc. Particularly because, as an art form, poetry can be written on napkins during lunch breaks and doesn’t require the money or status of novels and painting. Would you agree with this?

SA: No. In fact, since poetry has a more elite audience I would argue that novels are more egalitarian. And film is the most egalitarian of the arts.

LE: As the hardest form of writing to sell and the least read, do you believe poetry is dying? Is this just a myth of elites and academics?

SA: Everybody has a different definition of poetry. If you have a limited definition you could convince yourself that it’s dying. Yet you can hear poetry on the radio every day, for example the soundtrack for Once.

LE: As a successful writer, poet, and artist, have you felt pressure to conform to the demands of publishers and the status quo to write one type of story with one type of character?

SA: Nope. There is no such thing as the status quo. And readers, not publishers, determine status quo.

LE: How much does your experience as a visual artist and filmmaker influence your literary works and vice versa? Are the visual, performing, and literary arts entwined?

SA: They are all about telling stories.

LE: Have you ever inserted yourself into your works? Is it possible to entirely separate the writer from the text? Were any of your pieces difficult to write or difficult to come back to?

SA: I am what I write. It is often difficult and almost always exciting.

LE: Many of us just starting our writing careers are experiencing our first rejection letters. Do you still receive the occasional rejection?

SA: Imagine what it feels like to get a bad review in the New York Times. I’ve had them. A big career only magnifies any sense of rejection. If you want to be a writer you better toughen up.

Contributor Questions

Dan Watson: I want to know the story behind your degree from WSU. Was it an “Oops sorry about that” gift or did you finish all the necessary credits?

SA: I had one class left and earned those credits based on the work in my career.

Jodi Proust: What is your greatest fear?

SA: Heights.

Walter Schlect: I’ve noticed your earlier short stories take place on the Spokane Reservation, but later short stories, such as “What You Pawn I Will Redeem,” take place in Seattle. How do you approach a story set on an eastern Washington reservation differently than a story set in an urban environment such as Seattle? How is the sense of place different and do you consciously change your style?

SA: Each story is an individual story. I don’t think in terms of mass movements.