

The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven

The Author:

A Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, **Sherman Joseph Alexie, Jr.**, grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Washington. A bookish child, Alexie was educated off the reservation, first at a small German immigrant high school in Reardon, then at a Jesuit university in Spokane (Alexie describes himself as “Spokane Indian Catholic”) before transferring to Washington State University and majoring in American Studies. There he took a poetry class and was given an anthology of contemporary Native American poetry called *Songs From This Earth on Turtle's Back*. Alexie describes the profound importance of the discovery: “I opened it up and—oh my gosh—I saw my life in poems and stories for the very first time.”¹ After the enormous critical acclaim showered on his first book of poems, *The Business of Fancydancing*, Alexie was approached by New York literary agents who wanted to know if he had a fiction manuscript. Alexie obliged with *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, twenty-two linked stories which he had begun while still in college.

Alexie says:

“I've always been picky about heroes. Like most American males, I've always admired athletes, particularly basketball players. I admired Julius Erving and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar not only for their athletic abilities, but for who they seemed to be off the court. They seemed to be spiritual, compassionate, and gracious people. Neither has done nor said anything over the years to contradict my image of them.

Unlike many American males, I always admired writers as much as I admired athletes. I loved books and the people who wrote books. John Steinbeck was one of my earliest heroes because he wrote about the poor. Stephen King became a hero because he wrote so well of misfit kids, the nerds and geeks. Growing up on my reservation, I was a poor geek, so I had obvious reasons to love Steinbeck and King. I still love their novels, but I have no idea if they were/are spiritual, compassionate, and gracious men. There is so much spirit, compassion, and grace in their work, I want to assume that Steinbeck and King were/are good people. I would be terribly disappointed to find out otherwise. . . .

Most of my heroes are just decent people. Decency is rare and underrated. I think my writing is somehow just about decency. Still, if I was keeping score, and I like to keep score, I would say the villains in the world are way ahead of the heroes. I hope my writing can help even the score.”

The Work

From the opening story and its description of the emotional storms that wrack the reservation—brothers fighting, memories of hunger and humiliation, the smell of “Alcohol and sweat. Cigarettes and failure”—to the book’s final image of a father crying

into this food, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* offers a darkly humorous and unflinching look at life on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Alexie shows us both the material circumstances of that life, the historical plight that placed the Indians there, and the emotional consequences of a people cut off from their traditions in a modern world in which it is nearly impossible to assimilate. Characters recur throughout the stories—Victor, Junior, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Lester Falls Apart, and others—though it is not always clear who is narrating a story. Alexie has said, however, that all the characters represent parts of himself, so the collection can be read as a kind of oblique autobiography. But if this is autobiography it is not of the narcissistic variety now so popular. The stories that make up *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and the stories told within it, function not merely to record personal experience but to transmit and preserve the experience of a community—a tribe—and the individual’s life within that tribe. “Whatever happened to the tribal ties, the sense of community?” Victor asks in “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona.” And insofar as such ties can be sustained—in a world where six trees and a Chrysler Cordoba are given in return for the land of Oregon and Washington and where reservation basketball has replaced the Ghost Dance—storytelling helps sustain them.

In “Jesus Christ’s Half-Brother is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation,” the narrator thinks of the Pueblo Indians, how they “disappeared with food still cooking in the pot and air waiting to be breathed... There they were and suddenly they were forgotten for just a second and for just a second nobody thought about them and then they were gone.” For all their darkness and despair, the stories of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* make it impossible to forget the Indians of the Spokane Reservation. By writing about that reality so powerfully, Alexie helps to keep it alive.

Critical Questions

1. What does this novel seem to suggest or say about America?
2. What are your preconceptions about Native American writing and Native American culture? In what ways did Sherman Alexie’s book confirm, refute, or complicate those preconceptions?
3. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* is an unusual and attention-grabbing title. (Alexie says that it came to him in a dream). What does it suggest about the *tone* of the stories? What themes or recurring concerns does it introduce? Why would Alexie suggest that these icons of pop-culture, partners on a TV show, are fighting in the afterlife?
4. In the book’s opening story, as Victor’s Uncles Adolph and Arnold fight in the yard, someone shouts that they might kill each other. But the narrator writes that “Nobody disagreed and nobody moved to change the situation. Witnesses. They were all witnesses and nothing more. For hundreds of years, Indians were witnesses to crimes of an epic scale” [p. 3]. What are the crimes Native Americans have witnessed? What effects do these crimes have on the circumstances and behavior of the characters in Alexie’s stories?
5. In the story “A Drug Called Tradition,” how does tradition function like a drug for Native Americans? What does it offer them? What does it let them dream of?

6. The narrator of “The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn’t Flash Red Anymore” observes that “It’s hard to be optimistic on the reservation. When a glass sits on a table here, people don’t wonder if it’s half filled or half empty. They just hope it’s good beer” [p. 49]. Why is this mixture of humor and despair so effective in expressing the mood of life on the reservation? Where else do such moments occur in the collection?
7. In “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona” Thomas Builds-the-Fire has a dream in which he is told to go to Spokane and wait for a vision. What does his vision turn out to be? Why is he initially disappointed with this vision? What meaning does he ultimately derive from it? Why is this message so important for contemporary Native Americans?
8. Thomas Builds-the-Fire says that “We are all given one thing by which our lives are measured, one determination. Mine are the stories which can change or not change the world. It doesn’t matter which as long as I continue to tell the stories” [p. 72-3]. Why is storytelling so important? What purpose do stories serve for the Native Americans in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*? What larger purposes do the stories Alexie is telling serve?
9. Why is alcoholism such a pervasive problem for the characters in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*? What aspects of Native American history and of life on the modern reservation would lead to such widespread alcohol abuse?
10. In “Imagining the Reservation,” the narrator says, “Imagine Columbus landed in 1492 and some tribe or another drowned him in the ocean. Would Lester FallsApart still be shoplifting in the 7-11?” [p. 149]. How would you answer that question? What is the connection between Columbus’s arrival in the new world and Lester FallsApart’s shoplifting? What might Lester be doing now if Columbus had been drowned?
11. Norma leaves Jimmy, in “The Approximate Size of My Favorite Tumor,” because he won’t stop joking. But Jimmy says: “Still, you have to realize that laughter saved Norma and me from pain, too. Humor was an antiseptic that cleaned the deepest of personal wounds” [p. 164]. How does humor help Jimmy to face his cancer? Why does humor have this effect of relieving pain?
12. Alexie’s stories are not always strictly realistic. What elements in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* are fantastic or magical? What effects do these elements have on us as readers? Why would Alexie want to break some of the conventions of realistic narrative?
13. Trying to start his car on a winter morning, the narrator of “Family Portrait” reflects: “Years ago, these hands might have held the spear that held the salmon that held the dream of the tribe. Years ago, these hands might have touched the hands of the dark-skinned men who touched medicine and the magic of ordinary gods. Now, I put my hand to gearshift, my heart to the cold wind” [p. 196]. What does this passage suggest about the transformation of Indian life in the modern world? What have Native Americans lost? What have they been given in return?
14. In “An Indian Education,” Junior overhears bulimic girls in the bathroom and says, “Give me your lunch if you’re just going to throw it up.” He thinks of his own family eating canned beef “that even the dogs wouldn’t eat” and concludes that “There is more than one way to starve” [p. 177]. What is ironic about this juxtaposition? What kind of knowledge is Junior acquiring in school? How does that knowledge differ from what most white students would learn? How is it different from your education?
15. In what ways are the stories of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* interconnected? What characters, themes, and situations recur throughout the collection? In what ways do these connections strengthen the collection as a whole?

16. What is the overall portrait of life on the Spokane reservation that emerges from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*? How has reading the book changed your feelings about Native Americans? Has it made you reexamine your own values or changed the way you view your own culture?
 17. In the volume's title story, the narrator writes that when the clerk at 7-11 asks him "Will this be all?" it's like a company trying to induce impulse shopping or like adding a clause onto a treaty. "We'll take Washington and Oregon and you get six pine trees and a brand-new Chrysler Cordoba" [p. 184]. Why does the narrator make such a large statement based on such an ordinary transaction? Where else in the collection does an ordinary moment open out to suddenly reveal the history and fate of Native Americans?
 18. In "The Trial of Thomas-Builds-the-Fire," a BIA official claims that Thomas has "a storytelling fetish accompanied by an extreme need to tell the truth. Dangerous" [p. 93]. Why would Thomas's honesty be considered dangerous? What stories does he proceed to tell during his trial? What truths do those stories reveal? In what ways are Alexie's own stories dangerously honest?
 19. Alexie has said that many of the stories in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* are more like poetry than straightforward narratives. Which of the stories in the book have the feel of poetry? What effects does Alexie achieve in these more poetic pieces that would not be possible in more conventional narratives?
 20. In what ways does *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* transcend its specific time and place to explore the human predicament as it affects all of us? Which characters and problems could you relate to most strongly?
 21. In what ways does the idea of forgiveness offer a sense of hope for the characters in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*? Why would forgiveness be so important for these characters? Whom do they have to forgive?
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