Contemporary Literary Criticism

CLC 292

ISSN 0091-3421

Volume 312

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers

Jeffrey W. Hunter
PROJECT EDITOR

GALE
CENGAGE Learning

Detroit • New York • San Francisco • New Haven, Conn • Waterville, Maine • London

GALE
CENGAGE Learning

Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 312

Project Editor: Jeffrey W. Hunter

Editorial: Dana Ramel Barnes, Sara Constantakis, Kathy D. Darrow, Matthew Derda, Kristen Dorsch, Dana Ferguson, Michelle Kazensky, Reed Kalso, Jelena O. Krstović, Michelle Lee, Camille Reynolds, Marie Toft, Lawrence J. Trudeau

Content Conversion: Katrina Coach, Gwen Tucker

Indexing Services: Laurie Andriot

Rights and Acquisitions: Margaret Chamberlain-Gaston, Tracie Richardson

Composition and Electronic Capture: Gary Leach

Manufacturing: Cynde Lentz

Associate Product Manager: Marc Cormier

Gale
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI, 48331-3535

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 76-46132

ISBN-13: 978-1-4144-7083-2
ISBN-10: 1-4144-7083-5

ISSN 0091-3421-7079-5 **Contact your Gale sales representative for ordering information.**

Printed in the United States of America
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 15 14 13 12 11

Preface

Named "one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years" by *Reference Quarterly,* the *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (*CLC*) series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC,* therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today's reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author's career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author's works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.

- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style,* 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.

- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *CLC.* A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *CLC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in other Literature Criticism series.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC.* Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

Citing *Contemporary Literary Criticism*

When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as University of Chicago Press style or Modern Language Association (MLA) style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a bibliography set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style,* 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

James, Harold. "Narrative Engagement with *Atonement* and *The Blind Assassin.*" *Philosophy and Literature* 29, no. 1 (April 2005): 130-45. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism.* Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 188-95. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction,* edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism.* Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a works cited list set forth in the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers,* 7th ed. (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2009); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

James, Harold. "Narrative Engagement with *Atonement* and *The Blind Assassin.*" *Philosophy and Literature* 29.1 (April 2005): 130-45. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism.* Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 246. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 188-95. Print.

Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." *Canadian Women Writing Fiction.* Ed. Mickey Pearlman. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. 41-52. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism.* Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 246. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 276-82. Print.

Suggestions are Welcome

Readers who wish to suggest new features, topics, or authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions or comments are cordially invited to call, write, or fax the Associate Product Manager:

Associate Product Manager, Literary Criticism Series

Gale

27500 Drake Road

Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535

1-800-347-4253 (GALE)

Fax: 248-699-8983

Acknowledgments

The editors wish to thank the copyright holders of the criticism included in this volume and the permissions managers of many book and magazine publishing companies for assisting us in securing reproduction rights. Following is a list of the copyright holders who have granted us permission to reproduce material in this volume of *CLC*. Every effort has been made to trace copyright, but if omissions have been made, please let us know.

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL IN *CLC*, VOLUME 312, WAS REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING PERIODICALS:

American Indian Culture and Research Journal, v. 31, 2007. © 2007 Regents of the University of California. Reprinted by permission of the American Indian Studies Center, UCLA.—***American Literature,*** v. 77, no. 3, September, 2005. Copyright, 2005, Duke University Press. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.—***Arizona Quarterly,*** v. 63, Summer, 2007 for "A New Road and a Dead End in Sherman Alexie's 'Reservation Blues,'" by Scott Andrews. Copyright © 2007 by the Regents of the University of Arizona. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—***Artforum International,*** v. 36, March, 1998 for "Review: *No Lease on Life*, by Lynne Tillman," by Fanny Howe. Copyright © Bookforum, spring 1998. Reproduced by permission.—***Atlantis,*** v. 27, December, 2005 for "Back to Myth and Ethical Compromise: Garcia Marquez's Traces on Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides,*" by Francisco Collado-Rodriguez. Reproduced by permission of the author.—***BOMB,*** v. 97, fall 2006. Copyright © BOMB Magazine, New Art Publications, Inc., and its contributors. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—***Booklist,*** August, 1999. Copyright © 1999 by the American Library Association. Reproduced by permission.—***Buffalo News,*** October 3, 1999. Copyright © 1999 The Buffalo News. Reproduced by permission.—***College Literature,*** v. 35, winter, 2008. Reproduced by permission.—***Contemporary Literature,*** v. 47, fall, 2006; v. 49, fall, 2008. Copyright © 2006, 2008 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. All rights reserved. Both reproduced by permission. —***Critique,*** v. 44, fall, 2002; v. 49, summer, 2008; v. 51, 2010. Copyright © 2002, 2008, 2010 by Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation. All reproduced with permission of the Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation, published by Heldref Publications, 1319 18th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036-1802—***English Studies,*** v. 89, August, 2008 for "A Dialogue with Literary Theory: A. S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale,*" by Carla Rodriguez Gonzalez. Copyright © 2008 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC. Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis, Ltd., http//:www.tandf.co.uk/journals and the author.—***Guardian,*** February 23, 2008. Copyright © 2008 by Guardian Publications Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Guardian News Service, LTD.—***Independent,*** April, 1998; December, 2007. Copyright © 1998, 2007 Independent Newspapers (UK) Ltd. Both reproduced by permission—***International Fiction Review,*** v. 31, January, 2006. Copyright © 2006 International Fiction Association. Reproduced by permission.—***Kirkus Reviews,*** September, 2002; July, 2006. Copyright © 2002, 2006 Kirkus Media. All rights reserved. Both reproduced by permission.—***Library Journal,*** October, 1999; February, 2003. Copyright © 1999, 2003 Library Journals LLC, a wholly owned subsidiary of Media Source, Inc. No redistribution permitted.—***Literature/Film Quarterly,*** v. 31, 2003. Copyright © 2003 Salisbury State College. Reproduced by permission.—***MELUS,*** v. 35, fall, 2010. Reproduced by permission.—***Millions,*** October 28, 2009 for "*The Millions* Interview: Lynne Tillman," by Anne K. Yoder. Reproduced by permission of the author.—***Modern Fiction Studies,*** v. 55, winter, 2009. Copyright © 2009 by Purdue Research Foundation, West Lafayette, IN 47907. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of The Johns Hopkins University.—***Mosaic,*** v. 40, September, 2007. Copyright © Mosaic 2007. Acknowledgment of previous publication is herewith made.—***New Criterion,*** v. 28, May, 2010 for "An English Saga," by Richard Tillinghast. Reproduced by permission of the author.—***Novel,*** v. 42, no. 2, summer, 2009. Copyright, 2009, Novel, Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Duke University Press.—***Partial Answers,*** v. 7, 2009. Reproduced by permission.—***Publishers Weekly,*** August, 1999; October, 2002; August, 2006. Copyright © 1999, 2002, 2006 by Reed Publishing USA. All reproduced from *Publishers Weekly*, published by the PWXYZ, LLC, by permission.—***Review of Contemporary Fiction,*** summer, 1998; summer, 2003. Copyright © 1998, 2003 *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. Both reproduced by permission.—***Romanticism,*** v. 15, 2009. Copyright © Edinburgh University Press Ltd. 2009. Reproduced by permission of the publisher.—***Studies in American Indian Literatures,*** v. 20, spring, 2008 for "Interpenetrations: Re-encoding the Queer Indian in Sherman Alexie's 'The Business of Fancydancing,'" by Quentin Youngberg; v. 20, fall, 2008 for "The Violence of Collection: *Indian Killer*'s Archives," by Janet Dean; v. 21, fall, 2009 for "'A Limited Range of Motion?': Multiculturalism, 'Human Questions,' and Urban Indian Identity in Sherman Alexie's 'Ten Little Indians' by Jennifer K. Ladino. All reproduced by permission of the authors.—***Style,*** v. 43, winter, 2009. Copyright © Style, 2009. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of the publisher.—***Twentieth Century Literature,*** v. 53, fall, 2007. Copyright © 2007, Hofstra University Press. Reproduced by permission.—***Western American Literature,*** summer, 2005. Copyright © 2005 by The Western Literature Association. Reproduced by permission.

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL IN *CLC*, VOLUME 312, WAS REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING BOOKS:

Gale Literature Product Advisory Board

The members of the Gale Literature Product Advisory Board—reference librarians from public and academic library systems—represent a cross-section of our customer base and offer a variety of informed perspectives on both the presentation and content of our literature products. Advisory board members assess and define such quality issues as the relevance, currency, and usefulness of the author coverage, critical content, and literary topics included in our series; evaluate the layout, presentation, and general quality of our printed volumes; provide feedback on the criteria used for selecting authors and topics covered in our series; provide suggestions for potential enhancements to our series; identify any gaps in our coverage of authors or literary topics, recommending authors or topics for inclusion; analyze the appropriateness of our content and presentation for various user audiences, such as high school students, undergraduates, graduate students, librarians, and educators; and offer feedback on any proposed changes/enhancements to our series. We wish to thank the following advisors for their advice throughout the year.

Barbara M. Bibel
Librarian
Oakland Public Library
Oakland, California

Dr. Toby Burrows
Principal Librarian
The Scholars' Centre
University of Western Australia Library
Nedlands, Western Australia

Celia C. Daniel
Associate Reference Librarian
Howard University Libraries
Washington, D.C.

David M. Durant
Reference Librarian
Joyner Library
East Carolina University
Greenville, North Carolina

Nancy T. Guidry
Librarian
Bakersfield Community College
Bakersfield, California

Heather Martin
Arts & Humanities Librarian
University of Alabama at Birmingham, Sterne Library
Birmingham, Alabama

Susan Mikula
Librarian
Indiana Free Library
Indiana, Pennsylvania

Thomas Nixon
Humanities Reference Librarian
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Davis Library
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Mark Schumacher
Jackson Library
University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Greensboro, North Carolina

Gwen Scott-Miller
Assistant Director
Sno-Isle Regional Library System
Marysville, Washington

Contents

Sherman Alexie
1966-

(Full name Sherman Joseph Alexie Jr.) Native American poet, novelist, short story writer, and screenwriter.

The following entry presents an overview of Alexie's career through 2010. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC,* Volumes 96 and 154.

INTRODUCTION

Alexie is recognized for his examination of the Native American experience in contemporary American society. His writing frequently employs themes of identity and the Other. He began his literary career writing poetry and short stories, and his first published collection, *The Business of Fancydancing* (1992), earned him a *New York Times Book Review* Notable Book of the Year award. His first novel, *Reservation Blues* (1994), garnered significant critical acclaim as well and earned Alexie a number of prizes, including the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award, a *Granta* Best of Young American Novelists citation, and a Murray Morgan Prize. Alexie collaborated with Colville Indian and musician Jim Boyd on the album *Reservation Blues,* which contains songs from the book. Expanding his repertoire to another medium, Alexie wrote his first screenplay, *Smoke Signals* (1998), based on the story "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," from the collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993). The film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, where it won two awards. Alexie made his directorial debut by adapting for film a screenplay loosely based on the stories and poems in *The Business of Fancydancing,* which also won several awards. Alexie continues to work in letters and in film and is widely acknowledged as an important voice of the Native American perspective.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Alexie was born on October 7, 1966, and grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington, outside of Spokane. His mother was a Spokane Indian and his father a Coeur d'Alene. Alexie was born with hydrocephalus, an accumulation of fluid in the cranium, and, at the age of six months underwent brain surgery that he was not expected to survive. While attending the reservation's Wellpinit school, he was assigned a textbook that had formerly been assigned to his mother. Convinced that he could receive a better education elsewhere, he elected to attend high school off the reservation in Reardan, Washington, where he was the only Indian, save for the school's mascot. He excelled academically and also became a star basketball player, developing a love of the sport that endures to the present. Alexie used his childhood experiences as inspiration for his first young-adult novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* (2007).

Alexie graduated from Reardan High in 1985, then left for Spokane to attend Gonzaga University on an academic scholarship. After two years at Gonzaga, he transferred to Washington State University. He'd intended to study medicine, but changed his major to American Studies after succumbing to fainting spells in anatomy class. With encouragement from a poetry workshop teacher, Alexie discovered a talent for writing. He graduated from WSU in 1991 and subsequently received two poetry fellowships. A year after graduation, Alexie published his first two poetry collections, *The Business of Fancydancing* and *I Would Steal Horses* (1992). Although he had developed a drinking problem by the age of twenty-three, upon learning that *The Business of Fancydancing* was to be published, he immediately gave up alcohol.

A prolific writer, in 1993 Alexie published three more volumes of poetry as well as the acclaimed story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven,* which earned Alexie a PEN/Hemingway Award for Best First Book of Fiction and a Lila Wallace-*Reader's Digest* Writers' Award. The collection included the story "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," which became the basis for the acclaimed film *Smoke Signals* created in collaboration with another Native American, Chris Eyre. Since the release of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven,* Alexie has published three additional short-story collections: *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000), *Ten Little Indians* (2003), and *War Dances* (2009), which won a 2010 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. The story "What You Pawn I Will Redeem"

from *Ten Little Indians* was originally published in the *New Yorker* and was selected by author and editor Lorrie Moore for inclusion in the 2004 edition of the annual anthology *The Best American Short Stories.*

In 1999, Alexie began performing stand-up comedy and was the featured performer for the opening of the Vancouver International Comedy Festival in July of the same year. He has also made numerous television appearances. In 2004, 2006, and 2008, Alexie performed Artist-in-Residence duties at the University of Washington, teaching courses in American Ethnic Studies. Alexie lives in Seattle, Washington, with his wife, Diane Tomhave, and their two sons.

MAJOR WORKS

Alexie's debut collection, *The Business of Fancydancing,* contains five short stories and forty poems featuring early versions of characters that eventually develop and populate much of Alexie's later work. The book was a product of the workshop that prompted Alexie to focus on a career as a writer, and its themes include the construction of identity, hope, and disappointment. Through his characters, Alexie examines Native American stereotypes ranging from the noble savage to the alcoholic. He frequently uses humor to address the harsh realities faced by Native Americans living on reservations. The book was adapted for the screen and follows a gay poet named Seymour Polatkin as he moves to Seattle from his reservation while his friend, Aristotle Joseph, drops out of college to return to the reservation.

Alexie's first collection of stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven,* again tackles the idea of Native American stereotypes and further explores the notion of identity construction. The stories take place primarily on the Spokane Indian Reservation and are all loosely interconnected. Two of the main narrative voices in the stories are Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire, but none of the stories focuses on a single character. Rather, characters make appearances in different stories throughout the volume. Through these characters, Alexie describes the struggles faced by Indians growing up on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Each of the collection's twenty-two semi-autobiographical vignettes describes the relationships of the residents with one another and with the outside world.

Thomas Builds-the-Fire is also the protagonist of Alexie's debut novel, *Reservation Blues.* Builds-the-Fire lives on the Spokane Indian Reservation, which has not had a visitor throughout its history. Then famed blues guitarist Robert Johnson, who, according to legend, has sold his soul to the devil in exchange for the ability to play the guitar, appears. Johnson tells Builds-the-Fire that he is looking for a woman from his dreams, and Builds-the-Fire agrees to introduce Johnson to Big Mom, whom they believe can help Johnson. Johnson intentionally leaves his guitar in Builds-the-Fire's van, and Builds-the-Fire soon discovers the magical properties of the instrument. He forms a rock band with fellow reservation dwellers Victor Joseph and Junior Polatkin. The band is a success, but the trio, along with later additions Chess and Checkers Warm Water, are viewed by their communities as traitors for leaving their reservations. The band ultimately fails and the members return home, each choosing a new life path. The novel finds expression for Alexie's interest in magic realism, and spirituality and identity play important roles. Through the characters' experiences of reservation life juxtaposed against what they experience in the outside world, Alexie constructs an allegorical commentary about inner conflict and identity.

Alexie continued exploring racial identity in his novel *Indian Killer* (1996). The book is a departure from his earlier work in that it is stark, violent, and frequently disturbing in its subject matter. The story's protagonist is John Smith, a full-blooded Indian who was adopted in infancy from his tribe by a white couple. Smith grows to feel like an outsider but is unable to rejoin his people because he does not know which tribe he belonged to in the past. As he grows increasingly disturbed, hearing voices in his head, Smith concludes that his recourse against alienation will be the random killing of a single white man, forcing atonement for the injustices done to Indian people. After the killing, Smith decides that one murder isn't enough and he needs to continue killing whites in order to feel like an Indian warrior exacting belated revenge on white oppressors. To identify an Indian as the murderer, Smith crosses two owl feathers on his victims, the owl being a symbol of death for many Indian tribes. Ultimately, Smith recreates the fate of his childhood idol, a Jesuit Indian named Duncan who ends his own life as a result of his fractured identity.

Alexie left the reservation as a setting with his collection of stories titled *Ten Little Indians,* which are set mostly in urban Seattle. The nine stories in the collection address modern Indian culture. The 1950s and 1960s saw thousands of Native Americans leave their reservations and take up residence in American cities. As many as three generations of Native Americans have spent time overcoming socioeco-

nomic and psychological struggles, as well as cultural adaptation, and Alexie examines multiculturalism through the eyes of a new generation in this work. One story in the collection, "What You Pawn I Will Redeem," was included in both *The Best American Short Stories 2004* and *The O. Henry Prize Stories 2005.* In the story, a homeless, alcoholic Indian named Jackson Jackson sees in a pawn shop the powwow-dance regalia that was stolen from his dead grandmother fifty years earlier. The pawnbroker tells Jackson that he can buy the regalia for $999 if he returns by noon the following day. Jackson then embarks on a quest to get the money to buy the regalia, meeting several other Indians, many of them homeless, along the way. Over the next twenty-four hours, Jackson comes into and loses small amounts of money several times, never coming close to the amount he needs. Ultimately, he finds the pawn shop again and explains that he doesn't have the money. The pawnbroker gives him the regalia, which he immediately dons as he dances into the street.

"What You Pawn I Will Redeem" contains many elements of magic realism, multiculturalism, and tribal culture, but also a theme of obscured identity, with many characters who either do not know or won't say which tribe they belong to and some who assert that, in modern American society, it does not matter.

Alexie's young adult novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian,* mirrors many aspects of the author's life. Fourteen-year-old Arnold "Junior" Spirit lives on the Spokane Indian Reservation and, during his first day of high school, like Alexie, he is issued a textbook that had been assigned to his mother years earlier. Spirit, angered that his geometry book is so old, throws the book at his teacher. He transfers to a school off the reservation, where, like Alexie, he excels at basketball and academics. Spirit is a cartoonist and the book also features representations of the character's art. Praised for its rendering of a contemporary teenager's life on and off the reservation, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* won numerous awards, including the 2007 National Book Award for Young People's Literature.

Alexie's first volume of poetry since 2000, *Face* (2009), is divided into four sections: "War Stories," "Tuxedo with Eagle Feathers," "Size Matters," and "Ten Thousand Fathers." In these poems, he deals with such diverse subjects as his childhood on the reservation, his family, the Clinton impeachment, and Gonzaga University basketball. Alexie experiments with form in the volume, writing sonnets, couplets, prose poems, and more. The poems are often poignant ("Mystery Train," about a train ride with a teen whose parents are divorced), humorous ("How to Create an Agnostic," about his son), and introspective ("Inappropriate").

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Since early in his career, Alexie has been both praised and chided for his use of Native American stereotypes. Some critics have suggested that Alexie subverts traditional Native American stereotypes through satire, while others believe that, by employing such Native American characters as homeless people, mystics, alcoholics, and savages, he has merely reinforced negative Indian stereotypes. In her discussion of *Reservation Blues,* Wendy Belcher commented, "Whether intentionally or not, Alexie confronts stereotypes with their opposites."

Alexie's work has been praised for its portrayal of a broader range of experience than had traditionally been afforded characters in Native American literature. According to Quentin Youngberg, "This new kind of writing that Alexie and others are engaging embodies an attempt to break out of representations that feed American culture's fanciful stereotypes of the Indian." Alexie accomplishes this not only by exploring racial questions but also through his examination of nontraditional sexuality in characters such as Honey Boy in "What You Pawn I Will Redeem," described by Jackson Jackson as "one of them two-spirits." Youngberg noted, "Given Alexie's impulse toward de-representing the 'expected idea' in Native American letters, the presence of homosexuality as a thematic undercurrent to much of his work is particularly interesting . . . Indeed, little has been written at all about homosexuality in the broader field of Native American studies."

In his treatment of ethnicity and racial questions, critics and scholars frequently observe, Alexie often juxtaposes Indian and reservation life with the outside, white community. In *Western American Literature,* Blythe Tellefsen noted, "Alexie indicates that the two identities—American and Indian—are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and his texts suggest that all such national and ethnic identities are porous and fluid." This is demonstrated further in *Reservation Blues* by Alexie's use of the black bluesman Robert Johnson.

Alexie's poetry has also intrigued critics, and many have commented on his ability to bridge cultural gaps through verse. Laura Arnold Leibman reflected, "In the past some American Indian writers have insisted

upon excluding all non-Indians from Indian renewal ceremonies, but Alexie encourages a wide range of readers to engage in his work." Critics agree that Alexie's writing reflects an emerging American society in which identity is increasingly variable. According to Jennifer K. Ladino, "Alexie does recognize the complicated ways that cultural and racial distinctions continue to perform influential work in American society."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

The Business of Fancydancing (short stories and poetry) 1992
I Would Steal Horses (poetry) 1992
First Indian on the Moon (poetry) 1993
The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (short stories) 1993
Old Shirts & New Skins (poetry) 1993
Seven Mourning Songs for the Cedar Flute I Have Yet to Learn to Play (poetry) 1993
Reservation Blues (novel) 1994
Water Flowing Home (poetry) 1994
Indian Killer (novel) 1996
The Summer of Black Widows (poetry) 1996
The Man Who Loves Salmon (poetry) 1998
Smoke Signals (screenplay) 1998
One-Stick Song (poetry) 1999
The Toughest Indian in the World (short stories) 2000
The Business of Fancydancing (screenplay) 2003
Ten Little Indians (short stories) 2003
Dangerous Astronomy (poetry) 2005
The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian (juvenilia) 2007
Flight (novel) 2007
Face (poetry) 2009
War Dances (short stories) 2009

CRITICISM

Jerome DeNuccio (essay date fall 2002)

SOURCE: DeNuccio, Jerome. "Slow Dancing with Skeletons: Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven.*" *Critique* 44, no. 1 (fall 2002): 86-96.

[*In the following essay, DeNuccio traces Alexie's depictions of loss, despair, and self-sabotage in the short stories of* The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven.]

The Spokane Indian characters in Sherman Alexie's short story collection ***The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*** wage daily battle against small humiliations and perennial hurts. Situated on a reservation where the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) houses, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) trucks, and commodity foods continually mirror paternalism and dependency, and where "tribal ties" and a cohesive "sense of community" (74) have waned, Alexie's characters confront the dilemma of how to be "real Indians," of how to find "their true names, their adult names" (20), of how to find a warrior dignity and courage when it is "too late to be warriors in the old way" (63), of how to ameliorate what Adrian C. Louis has termed "the ghost-pain of history" (35)—that haunting sense of personal and cultural loss that generates a paralyzing sense of ineffectuality. They struggle to cope with passivity, cynicism, and despair to find healing for the pain that turns into self-pity and the anger that turns into self-loathing.

One of Alexie's characters, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, a Spokane storyteller, articulates a useful image for understanding the distress and anguish these characters experience: *"There are things you should learn"* he tells Victor and Junior, two young Spokanes who either narrate or are featured in 18 of the collection's 22 stories. "Your past is a skeleton walking one step behind you, and your future is a skeleton walking one step in front of you." Indians, thus, are always *"trapped in the now."* But the skeletons are "not necessarily evil, unless you let them be." Because "these skeletons are made of memories, dreams, and voices," and because they are "wrapped up in the now," it becomes imperative to "keep moving, keep walking, in step with your skeletons." To stop or slow down, to "slow dance" with one's skeletons, risks being caught "in the in-between, between touching and becoming," the immediately felt and the potentially experienced. Such a situation severs the necessary relation between the structure of experience that at any one moment has shaped each life and the structure of ongoing time to which that life must continuously adapt and in which it develops. Keeping in step is not easy, however, for "your skeletons will talk to you, tell you to sit down and take a rest, [. . .] make you promises, tell you all the things you want to hear." They can "dress up" as seductive women, as a best friend offering a drink, as parents offering gifts. But, "no matter what they do," Thomas warns, "keep walking, keep moving" (21-22).

Thomas's image of the skeletons suggests that Indian subjectivity is dialogic, an interplay of perspectives and points of view that Bakhtin describes as "a plural-

ity of unmerged consciousness" (26). The self is positioned in a social space replete with memories, dreams, and voices that invite attention and response, that must be accommodated and negotiated if the self as an individual and a tribal subject is to emerge. Such negotiation, although paramount, is never easy. Memories, dreams, and voices form a dense network of social significations. They bear traces, are mediated by social relations and cultural dynamics, are inflected by family, friends, lovers, traditions, mass media, history. The term *Indian* names a subject position traversed by competing claims, saturated by multiple insinuations, the confusion or mastering force of which can induce a capitulation that Thomas identifies as failing to keep "in step with your skeletons." Such capitulation forecloses choice, and the result is often self-sabotage. Commenting on what appears to a white state trooper as an unmotivated suicide by a successful tribal member, Junior notes that "when we look in the mirror, see the history of our tribe in our eyes, taste failure in the tap water, and shake with old tears, we understand completely" (178). To "keep moving, keep walking, in step with your skeletons," then, suggests the necessity of listening to *and answering* the multiple voices that clamor for attention, a process of accommodation *and negotiation* that resists totalization and keeps the self "unconsummated" and "yet-to-be" (*Art and Answerability* 13), moving always toward "becoming" rather than trapped "between touching and becoming," moving so that some coherent story of the self can be discovered. Thomas's image of the skeletons resonates throughout the collection's 22 stories, precisely because so many characters have fallen out of step and, thus, are suspended, passively and destructively, in a seemingly incoherent present.

Appropriately enough, the collection's opening story, **"Every Little Hurricane,"** displays the provenance of those elements that problematize Indian subjectivity. Significantly, Alexie sets the story at a New Year's Eve party ushering in 1976, the bicentennial year. Nine-year-old Victor, whose parents are hosting the party, awakens to what he thinks is a hurricane but is really a metaphor Alexie uses to represent Victor's experience of the intensifying anger and painful memories, unleashed by alcohol, that circulate among the Indian partygoers. Victor's father, for instance, remembers his father being spit on at a Spokane bus stop; his mother remembers being involuntarily sterilized by an Indian Health Service (IHS) doctor after Victor's birth; his uncles Adolph and Arnold fight savagely because each reminds the other of childhood poverty so great that they hid crackers in their bedroom so they wouldn't have to go to bed hungry. Lying in his basement bedroom, Victor thinks he sees the ceiling lower "with the weight of each Indian's pain, until it was just inches from [his] nose" (8). As the adults' drunken rage fills the house, it blends with and feeds Victor's own nightmare fears of drowning in the rain, of alcoholic "fluids swallowing him," for at the age of five he had witnessed at a powwow an Indian man drown after passing out and falling "facedown into the water collected in a tire track." "Even at five," the narrator notes, "Victor understood what that meant, how it defined nearly everything" (7). Seeking the comfort of physical connection, he lies between his unconscious parents, and, putting a hand on each of their stomachs, feels "enough hunger in both, enough movement, enough geography and history, enough of everything to destroy the reservations" (10-11). As this image suggests, the confluence of past currents of suffering meet in Victor.

Given the intensity of the pain that presses upon Indian subjectivity, it is not surprising that the adults and their children get caught "in the in-between, between touching and becoming." The now of felt experience becomes ceaseless repetition of what has been. Without a viable counterbalance of Spokane culture—a point Alexie implies by setting his opening story on the eve of America's bicentennial festivities—the self appears finalized, unmodifiable because personal history appears consumed by the totalizing narrative of History. There is no sense of particularity, of difference that prevents the self from being absorbed into the larger culture's dominant narrative, no way to position the self so that its story unfolds within, not into, ongoing time, no "outsidedness" (*Speech Genres* 7) where the choice to keep moving in step with one's skeletons keeps the impinging or "touching" now provisionally open to "becoming."

Victor's father, for example, has stopped walking in step with his skeletons altogether by retreating into an idealized moment twenty years earlier. Active in the Vietnam War protest movement and jailed for assaulting a National Guardsman, Victor's father endures two years of racial warfare in prison. On his release, he hitchhikes to Woodstock, arriving just in time to hear Jimi Hendrix's performance of "The Star-Spangled Banner." "'After all the shit I'd been through,'" he tells Victor, "'I figured Jimi must have known I was there in the crowd to play something like that. It was exactly how I felt'" (26). Twenty years later, he still plays the song and dissolves into tears in memory of a pure moment of connection and understanding, from which he views all his subsequent life as a declension. At thirteen, Victor finds he cannot penetrate his father's self-imposed exile from the painful memories of those twenty years and, thus, Victor loses the

potentially usable experiences, the realized knowledge, those twenty years contain. David Murray has noted that "the absent or failed father," a common feature in Indian texts, often symbolizes "the rupture and absence of guidelines from the past, and consequent alienation from a cultural heritage" (82). "'I ain't interested in what's real,'" Victor's father tells him. "I'm interested in how things should be'" (33). What Victor learns from his father is a strategy that shields him from pain but surrenders the connectedness to events that opens them to meaning: "instead of remembering the bad things, remember what happened immediately before. That's what I learned from my father" (34).

Consequently, the struggle to sort through fractious memories, dreams, and voices dogs Victor into young adulthood. In the story **"A Drug Called Tradition,"** Big Mom, the Spokane Tribe's spiritual leader, gives Victor a small drum as a "pager" to summon her in times of need. Victor doubts the drum's efficacy and admits he has never used it. Yet, even after Big Mom dies, he keeps it "really close," because it is "the only religion I have," and "I think if I played it a little, it might fill up the whole world" (23). Victor is situated at a boundary between cultural rejection and cultural connection, torn between skepticism toward the heritage of traditional spirituality and the desire to retain that heritage as a possible source of plenitude to "fill up" a world seemingly bereft of continuity. Much the same irresolution marks his relationship with the storytelling Thomas, whom he has bullied since childhood and whose stories he ignores, precisely because, for Victor, those stories register cultural loss. Yet, Victor admits, when Thomas "stopped looking at me, I was hurt. How do you explain that?" (21).

The story **"All I Wanted To Do Was Dance"** opens with Victor drunk and reeling wildly on a barroom dancefloor. Suddenly, he sees "the faces of his past. He recognized Neil Armstrong and Christopher Columbus, his mother and father, James Dean, Sal Mineo, Natalie Wood" (84). He then recalls himself as a young boy, "fancydancing in the same outfit his father wore as a child." Looking "into the crowd for approval," he sees his mother and father, "both drunk" and staggering, the "other kind of dancing" that "was nothing new" (87-88). The continuous history of EuroAmerican dominance, emblemized by Columbus and Armstrong, coupled with the shameful spectacle of his parents, have invalidated fancydancing as a culturally specific signifying practice by which he can position himself within a localized system of meaning. In its place Hollywood supplies a mass-mediated construction, the rebel without a cause, a subject position at once disenfranchising and inauthentic.

Similarly, a bewildering mix of personal experience, memory, dream, and history affects Junior in **"The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven."** Living in Seattle and involved in a loving but contentious relationship with a white kindergarten teacher, Junior dreams she is "a missionary's wife" and he is "a minor war chief who is her clandestine lover. Her husband discovers their relationship and shoots him. "Disembodied," Junior watches as his murder provokes massive and bloody warfare between several tribes of Indians and the U.S. Cavalry. Junior's "most vivid image of that dream," however, is three mounted soldiers playing "polo with a dead Indian woman's head," an image he at first considers "a product of my anger and imagination," but which he subsequently discovers in histories of war in "the Old West" and journalistic accounts of atrocities "in places like El Salvador" (186). This blurring of internal and external, wherein private nightmare is simultaneously public record disseminated across space and time, terrifies Junior. He finds himself both inside and outside his own experience, caught in the seam between past and present, agent and object, at once the author of a unique narrative expressing his own "anger and imagination" and an authored character in an old and ongoing story of racial hatred. The dream is and is not his own; he is himself and a historical clone. Moreover, the dream redoubles this ambiguity: killed early on, he haunts the scene, a disembodied witness of the carnage his sexual relationship with the white woman has produced. At some level, then, Junior experiences his cross-racial relationship as transgressive, a betrayal, perhaps, of tribal hopes that, as "a smart kid" and "former college student," he would provide the model for a "new kind of warrior" (188).

Returning to the reservation, Junior attempts to reestablish a connection with his personal past through basketball: "I'd been a good player in high school, nearly great. [. . .] I liked the way the ball felt in my hands and the way my feet felt inside my shoes" (188). The pleasure of recapturing his skill is short-lived, however; the entire history of Indian—white relations repeats itself on the night he is "ready to play for real." After some initial success, the white son of the reservation BIA chief takes control of the game away from Junior. "He was better that day," Junior admits, "and every other day." The basketball court, like the battlefield he dreamed of in Seattle, becomes for Junior a scene of failure and betrayal. The "BIA kid needed to be beaten by an Indian," and the watching tribal members have invested their hopes in him, "one of their old and dusty heroes." The white boy, however,

"played Indian ball, fast and loose," and, having appropriated the Indian style, Junior knows he is "better than all the Indians there" (188-89).

The next day Junior drives to Spokane and takes a job "typing and answering phones" for a "high school exchange program." The racial anonymity he finds as a detached telephone voice is compromised when his Seattle lover calls. "The connection was good," Junior notes, an ironic counterpoint to the lack of emotional clarity characterizing their conversation.

> "What's going to happen to us?" I asked her and wished I had the answer for myself.
>
> "I don't know," she said. "I want to change the world."
>
> (190)

The desire to direct change is not an option for Junior; as his dream and the basketball game have demonstrated, he can only experience its consequences. His relationship with his white lover, he realizes, is riven by an unbridgeable racial difference that distributes unequally the capacity for, even the imagining of, performative agency. The woman he remembers, "whose ghost has haunted" him, is, irreconcilably, a "real person" he can never know, a person whose otherness remains irreducible (189-90).

At their worst, the contending memories, voices, and dreams reach a kind of critical mass that impels Victor and Junior to racial abjection. In **"Amusements,"** Victor comes across a fellow tribesman, Dirty Joe, lying in a drunken stupor on a carnival midway. In an attempt to dissociate himself from a sight that evokes the contemptuous laughter of passing white tourists, Victor plays a practical joke on Dirty Joe by putting him on a roller coaster. When a crowd of whites gathers, their "open mouths grown large and deafening" with laughter, Victor suddenly realizes his complicity with those whites in a long history of cultural degradation. He has been, he sees, a "court jester" who has poured "Thunderbird wine into the Holy Grail," a freak like "the Fat Lady" and "the Dog-Faced Boy"—an "Indian who offered up another Indian like some treaty." Victor recognizes, in other words, that he has reduced himself from speaking subject of his own discourse to sign in official discourse, effectually removing himself from his own history. His complicity is a cultural forgetting or dismembering that, according to ethnologist Robert Cantwell, permits "parts and pieces of social identity" to signify only insofar as they comport with and consolidate the cultural myths of society at large (221). "[L]ike some treaty," then, Victor's betrayal of Dirty Joe, multiplied by many others many times, has contributed to "the folding shut of the good part of [the] past" (56, 58).

Junior, too, realizes the complicity involved in his denial of Indian identity. While in college he attended a basketball game after partying with a group of whites from his dormitory. One of the players on the opposing team is a twenty-eight-year-old who has overcome his inner-city Los Angeles upbringing and a stint in prison. Junior realizes that he and the basketball player "had a whole lot in common. Much more in common than I had with those white boys I was drunk with" (208). Nevertheless, he joins in the vicious taunting that greets the player's entrance on the court, an act that in its replication of white bigotry and in its defiance of shared experience actually constitutes self-subversion. Little wonder, then, that Junior describes his time in the city in terms of debilitating ineffectuality: "'It's like a bad dream you never wake up from. [. . .] Standing completely still on an escalator that will not move, but I didn't have the courage to climb the stairs by myself'" (207). Like Victor, Junior is immobilized by the kind of double consciousness W. E. B. Dubois describes as "the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (364).

Alexie's Indian characters are caught, as Bakhtin puts it, in the "framework of *other people's* words" about them, a framework that can "finalize and deaden" the self. But Alexie also demonstrates that in his characters "there is always something that only [they themselves] can reveal, in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse, something that does not submit to an externalizing secondhand definition" (*Problems* 59, 58). And Alexie again uses the Spokane storyteller Thomas Builds-the-Fire to explain this resistant something.

> 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. [. . .] They are all I have. It's all I can do.
>
> (72-73)

Thomas's "one determination" posits subjectivity as both determined and particular, given, and its own measure of value. There is a personal narrative that unfolds within the larger culture's master narrative, which situates an individual subjectivity within the cultural topography and keeps it in step with the skeletons of past and future. For Thomas, only recognizing and choosing to follow that "one determination" matters. Thomas himself is widely ignored by his tribe, yet he tells his stories, stories that he does not author but that come to him from the culturally specific ground to which he is connected and which