

☐ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

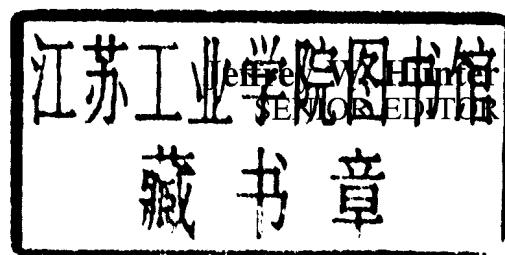
**CLC**

**154**

Volume 154

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

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



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# Preface

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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 biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

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- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- 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.
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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
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Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967), 211-51; excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 223-26.

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# Sherman Alexie

## 1966-

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

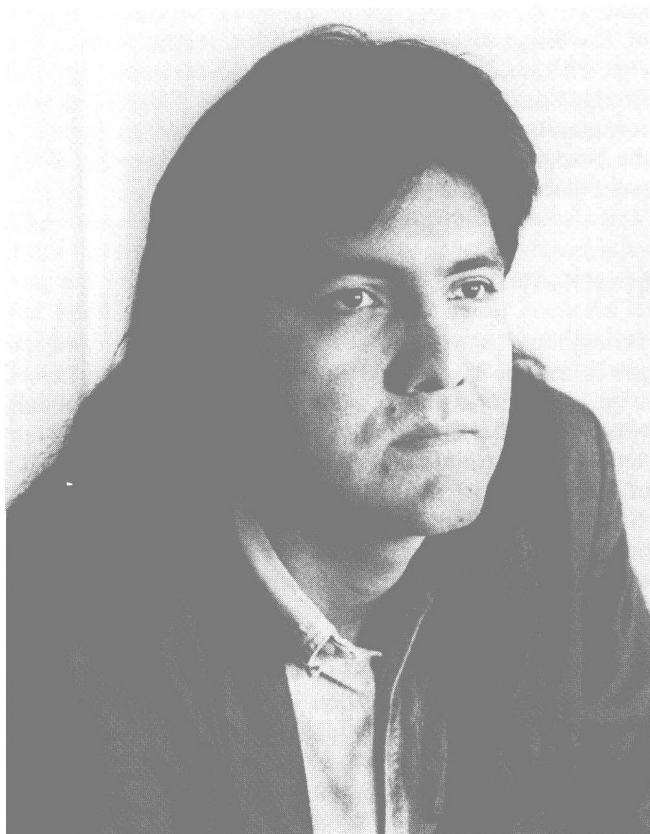
The following entry presents an overview of Alexie's career through 2000. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volume 96.

### INTRODUCTION

Alexie, a Spokane and Coeur d'Alene Indian, is one of the most prominent Native-American writers of his generation. Best known for his bold portrayal of the harsh realities of reservation life, Alexie has become a modern voice in the continuing search for Native-American cultural identity. Alexie's works detail, with dark humor, the debilitating influence of alcoholism and poverty that pervade life on the reservation as well as the anger that results from the distortion of true Indian culture. He is recognized as an innovative realist and erudite contributor to the modern Native-American tradition.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born on October 7, 1966, Alexie was raised on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. At birth he was diagnosed with hydrocephalus and, at six months of age, underwent perilous surgery to drain the fluid from his brain. Despite pessimistic predictions, Alexie not only survived but also became a child prodigy, learning to read by the age of two. He was mocked by other children due to his intellectual superiority and the appearance of his enlarged skull, a result of his past medical condition. His family life offered little comfort or shelter. His father was an absentee alcoholic and his mother worked long hours as a trading-post clerk and quilt-maker in order to support the family of eight. The social rejection Alexie experienced drove him to become an avid reader and dedicated student. When the school in Wellpinit could not provide him with the required credit he needed to attend college, Alexie transferred to Reardan High School, a predominantly white school located 30 miles from the reservation. At Reardan, Alexie gained acceptance from other students and became the school's basketball team captain, class president, and a member of the debate team. In 1985, he graduated with honors and gained a scholarship to Gonzaga University, where he began studying with aspirations of becoming a doctor. During this time, Alexie began to feel racially alienated and began abusing alcohol. This addiction greatly influenced the themes of his early writ-



ing. Alexie finally stopped drinking and began attending Washington State University. He took a poetry class taught by Alex Kuo, who encouraged him to pursue a career in writing. He graduated in 1991 and, in 1992, he published the poetry collection *I Would Steal Horses* and the poetry/short fiction collection *The Business of Fancydancing*, which was deemed the 1992 Notable Book of the Year by the *New York Times Book Review*. Alexie continued to publish his poetry with *Old Shirts & New Skins* (1993) and *First Indian on the Moon* (1993). His next volume, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), which is comprised entirely of short fiction, was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award. Alexie then published his first novel, *Reservation Blues*, which was awarded the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award in 1995. This was followed by his second novel, *Indian Killer*, in 1996, and *The Summer of Black Widows* (1997), a collection of poetry. After publishing in several literary genres, Alexie decided to expand his talent into a different type of media, writing the screenplay for the film *Smoke Signals* (1998). The film, adapted from portions of *The*

*Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, won the 1998 Sundance Film Festival's audience award. Alexie's other notable awards include the Lila Wallace/Reader's Digest Writer's Award, a poetry fellowship from the National Endowment of the Arts, and the Taos Poetry Circle World Heavyweight Championship Awards from 1998 to 2000. Additionally, he was named one of the twenty best young American novelists by *Granta* and *The New Yorker*. Alexie returned to the poetry genre in 2000 with the publication of *The Toughest Indian in the World*. Alexie lives in Seattle with his Native-American wife, Diane, and their son, Joseph. Alexie also remains active in the Native-American community, having served on the Presidential Panel for the National Dialogue on Race and on the board of directors for the American Indian College Fund.

## MAJOR WORKS

Throughout his work in several genres, Alexie often explores themes of despair, poverty, alcoholism, and racial anger—emotions that pervade the daily lives of modern American Indians. His early collection of poetry and short fiction, *The Business of Fancydancing*, portrays the reality of the banal existence experienced on the reservation and dissects the notion of “Crazy Horse dreams,” or aspirations that fail to materialize. Alexie evokes a type of magical realism, in which historical and fictional characters—such as Crazy Horse and Buffalo Bill—are awkwardly placed in modern-day situations. He also creates Native-American characters, who recurrently appear drinking, playing basketball, and often committing small crimes. Irony, which pervades Alexie's work, is used to juxtapose traditional views about Native Americans with the contemporary actuality of American-Indian life. These themes also suffuse his other poetry collections, including *I Would Steal Horses* and *Old Shirts & New Skins*. The characters in these works evoke a sense of powerlessness in their struggle for daily physical and emotional survival and in their fight to recover a lost cultural identity. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* captures this sense of a search for cultural redefinition, focusing on the pain, desolation, and bitterness that are experienced in the process. Alexie also revisits magical realism in this collection, portraying real and fictional cultural icons of the past such as Jimi Hendrix, Elvis Presley, the Lone Ranger, and Tonto amidst images of 7-Eleven stores, television, basketball, and commodity food items. The structural style of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* is often considered fragmented and is constructed of introspective epiphanies, allowing characters to come to terms with past and present interpretations of Native-American culture. Alexie's first novel, *Reservation Blues*, explores the successes and failures of an Native-American rock band with lofty dreams. One of Alexie's recurring characters, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, is given a guitar that once belonged to the legendary blues musician Robert Johnson. Johnson donates the guitar in order to escape from a deal he has made with the devil. As a result, the guitar is believed to be mystical. In the novel, Alexie extends characterizations

of the Native-American reservation inhabitants from his other works, reiterating the adversity faced by American Indians. Alexie later experimented with the genre of mystery in his highly controversial novel *Indian Killer*. In this work, John Smith, an American Indian adopted by white parents, is suspected, along with other urban Native-American characters, of a series of murders in which the victims are scalped. Appearing throughout the work are Alexie's recurrent themes of racial hostility and Indian cultural distortion. *The Summer of Black Widows* reiterates, with dark poetic humor, the hardships experienced on the reservation, the Native-American loss of ethnicity, and the desecration of the environment, intermingled with an abject acceptance of modern American culture. Alexie entered the world of filmmaking with his debut screenplay, *Smoke Signals*, an adaptation of his short fiction from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. The film was the first motion picture to feature—both in front of the camera and behind the scenes—an all-Native-American cast. Alexie returned to poetry and short fiction in 2000 with the publication of *The Toughest Indian in the World*. The work, through the diverse experiences and internal examination of its characters, attempts to define the Native American. This search for definition is left open, however, to be determined by the individual reader. In his writing, Alexie captures the hopelessness in Native-American society and explores the possibilities of forgiveness, acceptance, and reconstruction of cultural identity.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Alexie's work has been almost universally received as revolutionary, bold, and realistically reflective. His poetry and short fiction have been praised by critics for their realistic portrayals of the Native-American experience in resistance to the contemporary American mainstream conceptualization of the American Indian. Critics have lauded his use of dark satire and subtle epiphany to reshape the American view of his culture. His talent, according to reviews, lies in his ability to juxtapose humor with tragedy, historical figures with modern situations, and real people with fictitious characters. He has been noted for contrasting the “movie version” of the American Indian with the banal existence led by actual modern Indians, and the aspirations of the Native American with the powerless, hopeless reality of failure. Some critics have viewed Alexie's realism as harsh and racist—filled with hatred and anger against Anglo-American culture. Others, however, have viewed his powerful emotion as a catalyst for change and admire his refusal to submit to the idealistic stereotypes placed upon Native Americans. Proponents of Alexie's work have also refuted his ireful attitude with assertions that he embraces many aspects of contemporary American culture in his writing. With regard to his unique poetic and prose structure, some have viewed his form as truncated and underdeveloped. Many critics, however, have contended that his innovative form artfully complements his themes and augments his subtle satiric undertones. While many critics have agreed that Alexie's thematics are some-

times overpowering, they also argue that Alexie is one of the foremost Native-American literary realists of his generation.

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

- The Business of Fancydancing* (poetry and short stories) 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  
*Reservation Blues* (novel) 1995  
*Indian Killer* (novel) 1996  
*The Summer of Black Widows* (poetry) 1997  
*Smoke Signals* (screenplay) 1998  
*One Stick Song* (poetry and short stories) 2000  
*The Toughest Indian in the World* (short stories) 2000

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## CRITICISM

### Leslie Ullman (review date Summer 1993)

SOURCE: Ullman, Leslie. "Betrayals and Boundaries: A Question of Balance." *Kenyon Review* 15, no. 3 (summer 1993): 186-88.

[In the following excerpt, Ullman offers a positive assessment of the equivocal and metaphysical nature of *The Business of Fancydancing*.]

Sherman Alexie's collection of poems and stories [in *The Business of Fancydancing*] weaves a curiously soft-blended tapestry of humor, humility, pride, and metaphysical provocation out of the hard realities that make up its material: the tin-shack lives, the alcohol dreams, the bad luck and burlesque disasters, and the self-destructive courage of his characters, all Coeur D'Alene Indians living on the Spokane Indian reservation. Alexie is a member of this tribe. This, his first published collection, is tautly written and versatile in its use of forms, which include prose vignettes, two villanelle, and several delicately constructed, songlike poems making skillful use of white space. The collection also contains so many fine moments, subtle and forceful arrivals, that I wish I could simply quote whole pieces of it here.

Perhaps it is continual presence of paradox, in many forms, which makes this collection inspire a deep thoughtfulness and awe for something enduring inside its characters,

where it could just as well inspire indignation on their behalf or derision for their behavior. To the outward eye, there is not much to redeem some of them: a character named Simon backs his truck for miles down the highway, laughing wildly, until he hits a utility pole and knocks it over in a shower of sparks ("**Special Delivery**" 42); Thomas Builds-a-Fire holds the reservation postmistress hostage with "the idea of a gun" ("**Special Delivery**" 45-46); Old Man robs a bowling alley cash register of small change and then is caught because the driver of his getaway car has passed out ("**Misdemeanors**" 66); people accidentally wreck their cars, burn their houses, tumble down flights of stairs. Often they are drunk, but even if not, a certain ability to do the crazy thing and emerge intact seems to be part of their blood, like a drug that both kills and saves. They have become numb and pliant and indestructible. They have nothing to lose. They live in government housing, eat government food, drive cars that break down in the middle of nowhere, and are continually harassed by the law. "A drunk can survive the worst car wreck because his body offers no resistance," Alexie observes, and this statement rings as metaphor for a condition brought about by more than liquor. He continues, "Indians are never afraid of a little gravity" ("**Gravity**" 82).

Both Sherman Alexie and Adrian Louis, another native American writer under review, show us people held by borders. Their reservations contain them, offering a life of dull repetition and self-derision ("Seymour sure is drunk tonight. / He thinks he's a goddamn Indian," a fellow "skin" observes in "**Spokane Tribal Celebration, September 1987**," 74). They are free to leave and often do, only to find themselves facing another kind of boundary, a sense of being foreigners, bound more than they realized by a sense of where they came from and who they are: "did you ever get the feeling / when speaking to a white American / that you needed closed captions?" Alexie asks in "**Powwow**" (51).

Yet within this other boundary, a kind of inner reservation, resides a knowledge that is fluid and Zenlike, something not-bound, which supplies the resonant edge of paradox in Alexie's collection. His characters, including himself, remain detached in the midst of submissiveness, innocent and observant, patient, irreverent, and oddly untouchable. They are metaphysicians, and their observations nudge the mind time and again like a breeze passing through a stale room.

For example, Simon, holding forth in a bar in the story, "**Special Delivery**," explains "the politics of time, distance, and geography" in a way that at once defines and thumbs its nose at the limitations that characterize life on the reservation:

" . . . there's point A, and that's where you are, and then there's point B, and that's where you're supposed to be. So it's how you get from point A to point B, how long it takes you to do it, and what you see along the way, that is politics."



"I'm drunk now," one of the Andrew brothers yelled out from the back of the bar, "and I plan on being drunker later."

"My friends," Simon said, "point A is drunk. Point B is drunker. That's politics."

(39-41)

In the same story Thomas Builds-a-Fire, whose own meta-physical bent manifests itself as a need to tell and retell his "story" until it comes out right, quotes "the truth" as he has learned it from Simon:

If there's a tree in the distance and you run to get there, run across the grass with all your heart, and you make it and touch the tree, press your face against the bark, then it is all true. But if you stumble and fall, lose your way, move to the city and buy a VCR and watch cowboy movies all the time, then nothing is true.

(47)

Many characters in this book are shown in a no-win situation at the end of a scene or poem, simply waiting "for something to change" or to "happen," like the group of Indian boys on their way home from a basketball tournament, out of food, their car out of gas in the middle of the night on a cold highway in "**Traveling**" (15). Other characters are caught in a kind of no-man's-land between dreams that will never be realized and memories of past glory, like the speaker's father, once "the wildest / Indian boy on the reservation" who could "drink all night long and wake up / in the morning hitting jumpshots from thirty feet / until forever" ("**Love Hard**" 31), and whose life is later whittled down by a chainsaw accident that leaves him crippled, by unemployment, and by years of drinking ("**Father Coming Home**" 63-64).

In many ways the lives in this book are stopped in their tracks between "point A" and "point B," a place full of absences which act as presences, dreams which feed some inner flame even as they sputter down. Alexie evokes here what cannot be pinned down in statistics or diagrams: the *politics* of a condition. And though his book could well leave an aftertaste of bitterness, ultimately it does not, laced as it is by a humble, yet empowering sort of love. Despite the pull of the white world, which divides him as it must divide anyone living on any kind of *reservation*, Alexie seems sustained, and his vision deeply nourished, by the slim marginal area that is his by birthright. In the lovely poem, "**Indian Boy Love Song (#3)**," Alexie honors his kind of balance amidst the gridwork of borders in which he lives:

I remember when I told  
my cousin  
she was more beautiful

than any white girl  
I had ever seen.  
She kissed me then  
with both lips, a tongue

that tasted clean and un-  
clean at the same time  
like the river which divides

the heart of my heart, all  
the beautiful white girls on one side,  
my beautiful cousin on the other.

(56)

### Verlyn Klinkenborg (review date 18 June 1995)

SOURCE: Klinkenborg, Verlyn. "America at the Crossroads: Life on the Spokane Reservation." *Los Angeles Times Book Review* (18 June 1995): 2, 7.

[In the following favorable review of *Reservation Blues*, Klinkenborg praises Alexie's illustration of Native American life, his use of dark humor, and his consciousness of audience.]

The Spokane Native American reservation, as the novelist Sherman Alexie imagines it, surrounds Wellpinit Mountain in eastern Washington. "Pine trees blanketed the mountain and the rest of the reservation. The town of Wellpinit sat in a little clearing below the mountain. Cougars strolled through the middle of town; a bear once staggered out of hibernation too early, climbed onto the roof of the Catholic Church, and fell back asleep." The Spokane reservation—"Population: Variable"—is almost empty of people but full of their forgetting, a place where life is ordered by "rules of conduct that aren't collected into any book and have been forgotten by most of the tribe," but the dietary staples are beer, commodity cheese, commodity apple-sauce and commodity peanut butter.

Big Mom, a legendary source of wisdom and the best fry bread cook on the reservation, lives at the top of Wellpinit Mountain. One day, a black man appears on her doorstep. He is Robert Johnson, the great blues guitarist, who wrote a famous song about going to the crossroads. That song provides one of the epigraphs to Sherman Alexie's wonderful new novel, *Reservation Blues*. But *Reservation Blues* is not Big Mom's story, nor is it Robert Johnson's. It's the story that results when Johnson gives his magic guitar—a guitar that talks and plays itself and finds its way home when lost—to a young Spokane Native American named Thomas Builds-the-Fire. Thomas is the reservation storyteller, a teller of tales that hang "in your hair or clothes like smoke." Thomas also writes songs, plays bass and sings. With his friends—Victor Joseph, who inherits Johnson's guitar; Junior Polatkin, the drummer, and Chess and Checkers Warm Water, two women from the Flathead reservation in Montana—Thomas assembles a rock-and-roll band called Coyote Springs. Coyote Springs comes to life, it practices, it plays, it acquires a reputation and it collapses under the weight of its own hopes. So much for the plot.

*Reservation Blues* is an extension, a fulfillment really, of Alexie's remarkable 1993 short-story collection called *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. In both

books, the setting is the Spokane Reservation and the main characters are Thomas, Victor and Junior, though the boys in the short stories have grown into their 30s in the novel. The prevailing tone in these two books is one of excoriating humor, and they are written with a hard-luck wit that is somehow darker than the mute appeal of pure tragedy and at the same time more forgiving. Alexie writes fictions of consciousness, not event. Their subject is, nakedly, ethnically, what it means to be Native American. As you read *Reservation Blues*, you can feel Alexie's purposely divided attention, his alertness to a divided audience, Native American and Anglo. He is willing to risk didacticism whenever he stops to explain the particulars of the Spokane and, more broadly, the Native American experience to his readers. But Alexie never sounds didactic. His timing is too good for that. *Reservation Blues* never misses a beat, never sounds a false note.

In the most obvious narrative sense, Thomas Builds-the-Fire occupies the heart of the novel. "With his long, black hair pulled into braids, he looked like an old-time salmon fisherman: short, muscular legs for the low center of gravity, long torso and arms for leverage to throw the spear." Thomas is the novel's conscience, and it is Thomas's puzzlement, his quizzical outlook on the world, that the reader comes to understand best. But the central character in *Reservation Blues* is really the reservation itself, the crossroads of which Robert Johnson sings. It is both a land of exile and an occupied territory, a place where the Spokane Native Americans—who, like all Native Americans, have lost control of the symbols that represent them—are constantly negotiating their identity in the face of white America, trying to decide how Native American is it whenever a question of value arises. Before he dropped out of college, for instance, "Junior had learned from Freud and Jung that dreams decided everything. He figured that Freud and Jung must have been reservation Indians because dreams decided everything for Indians, too."

Because they still expect a kind of exoticism from Native Americans, some readers will find it hard to believe how American Alexie's vision of the Spokane Reservation is. I don't mean that in this novel the Spokane Reservation somehow represents America—a trivial idea, at best. I mean that in its eclecticism, in the way it adapts what it wants from the white world as well as what the white world forces upon it, the reservation reflects with peculiar intensity the cultural incoherence of the nation surrounding it. Where a cultural gap arises, something fills in, no matter how incongruous it seems. "All they know about religion they say in *Dances with Wolves*," Thomas says of Junior and Victor. When he is obliged to defend the music of Coyote Springs, Thomas says, "An Indian woman invented the blues a day before Columbus landed, and the rock 'n' roll the next day." In Alexie's world, you take your origins wherever you find them.

Still, the collision between white and Native American cultures resonates throughout *Reservation Blues*. One of the prevailing dream-images in this novel is a 19th-Century

massacre of Native American horses by the U.S. Army, a massacre that ended with the murder of one last emblematic colt. "That colt," writes Alexie, in a way that suggests the layering of this novel, "fell to the grass of the clearing, to the sidewalk outside a reservation tavern, to the cold, hard coroner's table in a Veteran's Hospital." Other times, Alexie wastes no time on ellipsis or metaphor or memory. Betty and Veronica are two white women, groupies of an all too familiar sort, who latch onto Victor and Junior. But at last reservation life is too much for them, and they leave for Seattle. "Can't you handle it?" Chess Warm Water asks Betty and Veronica as they get ready to go. "You want the good stuff of being Indian without all the bad stuff, enit? Well, a concussion is just as traditional as a sweatlodge. . . . What did you New Agers expect? You think magic is so easy to explain? You come running to the reservations, to all these places you've decided are sacred. Jeez, don't you know every place is sacred? You want your sacred land in warm places with pretty views. You want the sacred places to be near malls and 7-Elevens too."

It's almost impossible to talk about Alexie's subject—ethnicity, cultural dominance, poverty, alcoholism—without turning serious, if only because seriousness is such a good mask for ineffectuality. Alexie himself is scathingly funny. His sense of humor ignores every cultural boundary, and its frankness is amiable and appealing. Here is an example. Near the end of the novel, after Coyote Springs has returned to the reservation, Junior Polatkin kills himself. One day, he turns up in the passenger seat of a van that Victor is driving.

Victor was nervous. He'd never talked to the dead before. It felt like a first date.

"This feels like a first date, enit?" Junior asked.

"Yeah, it does."

"So," Junior said, "am I going to get lucky?"

Alexie has been called a lyrical writer, but to call him that is to miss how deadpan he really is, how much his humor depends on saying what hurts, in a matter-of-fact voice. Humor never mitigates the truth, not even when it's as painful as the truth Alexie's characters constantly face. The reservation truth in *Reservation Blues* boils down to something Chess Warm Water discovers one night when she and her sister and Thomas are talking about their drunken fathers. "'Ain't that the true test?' Chess asked. 'You ain't really Indian unless there was some point in your life that you didn't want to be.'"

#### Denise Low (review date Winter 1996)

SOURCE: Low, Denise. Review of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, by Sherman Alexie. *American Indian Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (winter 1996): 123–25.

[In the following review, Low examines Alexie's short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* in relation to postmodernist theory.]

Peter Burger, in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, notes that artistic works reflect the time and place, or history, of their cultures, "the unfolding of object and the elaboration of categories are connected" (p. 16). Sherman Alexie's short stories in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* could not have been written during any other period of history. The twenty-two short tales read like a casebook of postmodernist theory—beyond surrealism and absurdity, and certainly beyond classicism. Irony, pastiche, and mingling of popular cultures occur throughout the book.

David Lehman gives one of the most succinct definitions of the cultural event called postmodernism in the *Associated Writing Programs Chronicle*:

It revels in comedy and exalts the spirit of parody and play. It treats the monuments of tradition in particular with jubilant irreverence. The distinction between artifacts of high and low culture gets leveled. Characters and lives are confused. Poems based on intricate rules are written in a kind of partnership with the language, an attempt to bring out the poetry latent in the language rather than to impose meaning on language. . . . Postmodernism is the triumph of irony.

Alexie's Native American characters journey through a collage of urban and reservation referents. Postmodernism is the technique of communication—as well as survival—in this simulated world that resembles Washington state. Underlying the surface of text, though, is a very human voice.

Irony frames every piece in the book. In the story "**A Drug Called Tradition**," the narrator tells of Thomas Builds-the-Fire's party, financed by lease money from a utility company, "When Indians make lots of money from corporations that way, we can all hear our ancestors laughing in the trees. But we never can tell whether they're laughing at the Indians or the whites" (p. 13). Much of the lease money will go for beer, and the destructive effects of alcohol are explicated in many of the stories.

Another painfully ironic tale is "**Indian Education**," with vignettes for each grade, first through twelfth. Some of the best writing is in this story, so each section reads like a prose poem. Each uses the ironic situation of an Indian child within a non-Indian institution. Here the narrator parodies the traditional Spokane way of naming children, "I was always falling down; my Indian name was Junior Falls Down. Sometimes 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" (p. 172). These names reflect incidents of violence against the child, lightened by the self-mocking, ironic humor.

Alexie makes light of traditions of all kinds. Quilts are used as a background to "**A Good Story**," and the story's whimsical effect comes from its pieced-together structure. Crazy Horse is the namesake of "**Crazy Horse Dreams**," but here the Sioux leader is not an inspiration, but a symbol of failure. When the character Victor tries to make

love to a woman at a powwow, he falters, "His hands were small. Somehow she was still waiting for Crazy Horse" (p. 40). He knows the woman's sexual fantasy, "She thought she could watch him fancydance, watch his calf muscles grow more and more perfect with each step. She thought he was Crazy Horse" (p. 41). Victor cannot measure up to the idealized hero in any part of his life. In another story, the narrator imagines that Crazy Horse invented the atomic bomb. This displacement of histories emphasizes the failure of contemporary warriors.

Other cultural icons in the collection include Jimi Hendrix, Jesus Christ, and the Lone Ranger and Tonto. They all blur together as equivalent cultural images. In "**Jesus Christ's Half-Brother Is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation**," the narrator takes responsibility for an orphaned baby and takes on Christ-like characteristics. In the title story, the narrator and his white paramour play out the roles of Tonto and the Lone Ranger. These and other images mix in Alexie's prose to form a postmodernist backdrop of real and imagined people. They work together in the imagination to create the media-permeated scenery of the latter twentieth century.

Alexie's other writings are essays and poetry, including the acclaimed book of verse, *The Business of Fancydancing*. The imprint of the poet's training is apparent here in the fine tuning of language. The ending of the story "**Family Portrait**" shows Alexie at his best as he describes tragedy in everyday terms:

The television was always loud, too loud, until every emotion was measured by the half hour. We hid our faces behind masks that suggested other histories; we touched hands accidentally and our skin sparked like a personal revolution. We stared across the room at each other, waited for the conversation and the conversion, watched wasps and flies battering against the windows. We were children; we were open mouths. Open in hunger, in anger, in laughter, in prayer. Jesus, we all want to survive.

(p. 198)

The images of television noise, masks, insects at the windows, and children's open mouths make this a word-painting about loneliness. "Jesus" in the last line is both a plea and a curse word.

Throughout the book, the lyrical strain gives the disparate stories a continuity, even though different characters take on the role of narrator. This underlying voice lends a tone of compassion that takes away the emotional distancing of irony. By the end of the book, readers care about Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Norma Many Horses, Uncle Moses, and Victor. They care about people who laugh and age and keep trying.

Alexie ruptures narratives, confuses human and fictitious people, pastiches images, and plays with illusion. Like authors Gerald Vizenor, Ray Young Bear, and Adrian Louis, he ranges across all of Indian country. Along the way he

does not leave out television, 7-Eleven stores, or other institutions of contemporary pan-Indian life. The aggregative technique of writing uses many vignettes that add up to a new kind of written storytelling that comes—often—too close to the truth.

**Jennifer Gillan (essay date March 1996)**

SOURCE: Gillan, Jennifer. "Reservation Home Movies: Sherman Alexie's Poetry." *American Literature* 68, no. 1 (March 1996): 91–110.

[In the following essay, Gillan examines Alexie's work and comments on its focus on an anglicized version of American-Indian history and tradition.]

When David Bell, the protagonist in Don DeLillo's *Americana*, leaves New York, he heads north on a long journey into the "gut of America."<sup>1</sup> He arrives in a small Maine town resembling a sound stage and stays overnight in an old house, "the place where everyone's grandmother lives in television commercials." He is told a story about a Sioux holy man, Black Knife, who prophesies that only a trip into what Bell earlier calls the swamp of our being would cure America and allow it to become, finally, "the America that fulfills all of its possibilities" (128–29). The story reassures David that he needs to travel to the "great golden West" filled with Indians to find the "big outdoor soul of America" (123, 25). Although, like many before him, he sets off on a road trip west hoping to find America in the heart of Indian country, he never makes it to his destination. Instead, he finds himself in a small Midwestern town, unable to piece together the "fragments of the exploded dream" (137) of his life and of America.

Sherman Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian from Washington State, is even more distraught than David Bell that the authentic American landscape eludes him. He reiterates David's concern, "What simple splendors had I missed to have been born so late" (*Americana*, 220), but with a difference. From a tribe neither Plains nor Pueblo, which few would associate with the Hollywood version of American Indians, Alexie wonders whether his people ever had access to the authenticity all America seems to associate with Indians. Alienated from their American Indian culture as well as from America, the characters in Alexie's poetry and prose collections want to believe in the wisdom of old Indian prophets, want to return to the "old ways," but know that doing so will just trap them inside another clichéd Hollywood narrative.

Alexie's poems and stories often careen toward these clichés, as the reader waits in stupefied patience for the inevitable impact of the meeting between the Lone Ranger and Tonto, the warring factions that have often marked the poles of his life. A self-described *Brady Bunch* Indian, Alexie was born in 1966 on the Spokane reservation and grew up in the 1970s in the glare of the kaleidoscopic col-

ors of a "mod" TV sitcom. His first poems appeared in *Hanging Loose* in 1989, and the press of the same name published his first full-length manuscript, *The Business of Fancydancing*, in 1992 when Alexie was just twenty-five.<sup>2</sup> Between 1993 and 1995 Alexie published another poetry collection, *Old Shirts & New Skins* (1993); a poetry and prose compilation, *First Indian on the Moon* (1993); a book of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993); and a novel, *Reservation Blues* (1995).<sup>3</sup>

Critical reception of his books has been positive, if limited. Some reviewers have been perplexed by Alexie's youth and productivity. Reynolds Price wondered in a review of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* if Alexie might be too prolific, publishing "too fast for his present strength."<sup>4</sup> Complaining that Alexie "has plumbed a number of obsessive themes and relationships as deeply as they permit," Price suggested that Alexie should slow down and "discover a new and merciful rhythm that [would] help him find new eyes, new sights and patterns in a wider world, and a battery of keener voices for launching his urgent knowledge toward us."<sup>5</sup> It is this urgency that fuels Alexie's writing. Always aware that the average Indian male dies at fifty, Alexie seems determined to fashion poetry out of his experiences while he can. Given the poverty level on most reservations and the fact that American Indians have the highest suicide and alcoholism rates in the country, perhaps this urgency is justified.<sup>6</sup> Often, it is his manic pace that makes Alexie's work so wondrous, even if it is marked, as Price observed, by "moments of unrevealing monotony."

Perhaps these moments of monotony can be attributed to Alexie's flat poetic style, which relies heavily on ordinary prose to illuminate its vision. In fact, the prose-like quality of Alexie's writing often makes it difficult to differentiate between his stories and poems. The stories in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* are crafted in this same flat style as his poems. Adopting a minimalist approach to character and setting, Alexie writes in vignettes which often begin with a fragmentary characterization and end with a flash of revelation. One of these stories, "**Jesus Christ's Half-Brother Is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation**," is organized into a series of short sketches, each about a paragraph in length. Because these vignettes are so fractured and the events they detail almost surreal, it is impossible to describe them in terms of plot. They seem instead to be organized around a series of epiphanies through which each narrator comes to accept his own past. In one sketch in which the narrator saves a baby from a fire and decides to adopt him, the vignette format is especially powerful: "I pick James up from the cold and the grass that waits for spring and the sun to change its world but I can only walk home through the cold with another future on my back and James's future tucked in my pocket like an empty wallet or a newspaper that feeds the fire and never gets read. Sometimes all of this is home" (*LR*, 114). And home, as we learn in Alexie's poetry, is a HUD house and commodity cheese, a