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# **BookRags Biography**

## **Sherman Alexie**

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# Sherman Alexie Biography

**Name:** Sherman Alexie  
**Birth Date:** 1966  
**Nationality:** American  
**Ethnicity:** Native American  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupations:** author, translator

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## Works

- **Selected writings**
- *The Business of Fancydancing*, Brooklyn, Hanging Loose Press, 1992.
- *I Would Steal Horses*, 1992.
- *Old Shirts and New Skins* UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 1993.
- *First Indian on the Moon*, Brooklyn, Hanging Loose Press, 1993.
- *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, New York, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993.
- *Reservation Blues*, New York, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995.
- *Indian Killer*, New York, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1996.
- *The Summer of Black Widows*, Brooklyn, Hanging Loose Press, 1996.
- *The Toughest Indian in the World*, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000.

## Historical Context

- **The Life and Times of Sherman Alexie (1966–)**
- **At the time of Alexie's birth:**
- National Organization of Women (NOW) was founded
- Lyndon B. Johnson was president of the United States

## Sherman Alexie Biography

- U.S. troops entered Cambodia
- Richard Speck killed eight student nurses in Chicago
- New Metropolitan Opera House opened in New York City
- **The times:**
- 1957–1975: Vietnam War
- 1983: American Invasion of Grenada
- 1991: Persian Gulf War
- **Alexie's contemporaries:**
- N. Scott Momaday (1934–) American writer, poet, and educator
- Russell Means (1940–) American activist
- Graham Greene (1950–) American actor
- **Selected world events:**
- 1972: Native Americans marched on Washington, DC
- 1975: Pine Ridge Reservation shoot-out between FBI and American Indian Movement (AIM) members
- 1977: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* was published
- 1981: Attempt to assassinate Ronald Reagan failed
- 1983: Sally Ride became first American woman in space
- 1989: National Museum of the American Indian was established
- 1990: Charter of Paris was signed, formally ended the Cold War

## Authors and Artists for Young Adults Biography

Sherman Alexie admits he was once a "good" Indian, his term for a person of Native American heritage who does his best to assimilate into mainstream North American society. It drove him to drink, and then to write, and with the latter act he found his own particular brand of salvation. A major theme of Alexie's poetry and fiction is the destructiveness of the dominant white culture upon the Indian world, which is then rendered rudderless and confused. Much of the grist for these ideas and incidents comes from life as he witnessed it growing up on the Spokane Reservation. "His work offers a devastating and deeply human portrait of contemporary Indian life," wrote

Doug Marx in *Publishers Weekly*. At the age of just thirty-one, Alexie landed a first in the annals of American cultural history with his screenplay for *Smoke Signals*, based on a collection of his short stories. *Smoke Signals* was the first feature film to be written, directed, and acted by Native Americans.

Alexie once explained to a journalist that he did not scheme to become a writer so that he could "set the world straight about the Indian experience," as he told Terry Lawson in the *Detroit Free Press*. Rather, he only hoped to "reclaim my own story. Oh, and to get revenge. I'm big on revenge," the writer added. Born on the Spokane Reservation in Washington state in 1966, Alexie's father was a Coeur d'Alene, and the Spokane ancestors on his mother's side were forcibly removed by U.S. Cavalry forces in 1858 to make way for white settlers. Eight hundred of the Spokanes' horses were slaughtered as well. A legacy of economic deprivation for Native Americans manifests itself well into the twentieth century, and one marker of this is infant mortality rates. Alexie himself was born with hydrocephaly, or excess fluid in the cranium, a very serious condition. His parents were informed that surgery was possible, but the infant might not survive it, or if he did, would probably be mentally retarded. Yet Alexie did survive, and surprised everyone with his strong, intellectually curious personality, even at an early age. As a toddler, he has said, he knew he would be famous. "I was smart, and I knew it," he told Lawson in the *Detroit Free Press* interview. "I didn't know what I would be good at, had no idea really."

Still, Alexie suffered seizures until the age of seven, and had to take strong drugs like lithium to control them. Because of his health problems, he was excluded from many of the strenuous activities that are rites of passage for young Indian males in Wellpinit, the reservation's sole town. "I was a total geek, which automatically made me an outcast, so in order to succeed I had to be smarter than everybody else," Alexie told Marx in *Publishers Weekly*. "I was fierce in the classroom, I humiliated everybody and had my nose broken five times after school for being the smart kid." By the time he was twelve and had read the entire library at his reservation school, it was clear to Alexie he needed a greater challenge. So in 1981 he transferred to a school in Spokane, where he was the only student of official Native heritage. There he excelled

in both academics and—surprisingly—in athletics, becoming a standout basketball player for the Reardan High Indians, a name whose irony was not lost on the rest of his family. He was also class president, and the achievements won him a scholarship to a Roman Catholic college in the area, Gonzaga University.

Alexie enrolled in Gonzaga's pre-med curriculum, but was overwhelmed by the grotesqueries in anatomy classes. He switched to law, but found that unpleasant as well. He also started drinking. Depressed, he found some solace in literature classes and the canon of English-language poets, which he initially approached as "anthropology," as he explained to Marx in *Publishers Weekly*: "I didn't see myself in them," he said of writers like Walt Whitman and William Butler Yeats, "...and then I realized that the poems *weren't* just about white people. They were about everybody. I also realized that the poets were outcasts, too." Alexie dropped out of Gonzaga after two years, but despite his severe drinking did manage to enroll at Washington State University. There he took a writing class taught by Alex Kuo, a published poet, who lent his student an anthology titled *Songs of This Earth on Turtle's Back*. The book changed his life, especially a line from an Adrian C. Louis poem, "Elegy for the Forgotten Oldsmobile": "O Uncle Adrian! I am in the reservation of my own mind." The line had such an impact upon Alexie that "I started crying," he recalled in the interview with Marx. "That was my whole life."

### **Literary Beginnings**

Alexie began reading the work of other Native American writers and then writing himself. His first collection, *I Would Steal Horses*, was published in 1992, and a literary career picked up steam rapidly from that point on. The Brooklyn, New York-based Hanging Loose Press published his second collection, *The Business of Fancydancing*, that same year; three other books by Alexie would be issued in 1993 alone. Writing in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Susan B. Brill described *The Business of Fancydancing* as "stories and poems about reservation life—a life of alcoholism, commodity food, broken families, and a pervasive racism...." The work sold very well—over 10,000 copies—and Alexie turned to writing full-time. He quit

college three credits short of a degree (Washington State awarded him a bachelor's in 1995 after he had published several books), and even more portentously, decided to quit drinking. Soon he was well-known in contemporary literary circles for invoking laughs at his readings. "I get high, I get drunk off of public readings," Alexie said to Marx in *Publishers Weekly*. "I'm good at it. It comes from being a debater in high school, but also, crucially, it comes from the oral tradition of my own culture."

Life in Wellpinit and Alexie's own hardships continued to provide inspiration for his work. In his 1993 collection of verse, *First Indian on the Moon*, he writes about his sister and her husband who died in a house fire, so deeply asleep from alcohol they didn't hear the smoke alarm. Yet there are also frequent flashes of love and humor in his works. "Comic moments appear suddenly and unexpectedly on this harsh landscape, so that irony twists despair into a peculiar kind of faith," remarked Carl Bankston III in the *Bloomsbury Review* about Alexie's style. Though he had experimented with the short-story format before, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, published in 1993, was his first fully developed collection of prose works. In one of the short stories, a father and son take a short trip into Spokane. Both are diabetic, and as Brill explained in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, "government-subsidized commodity food is one of the signs of Indian America that appear throughout Alexie's writing—a sign of particular significance to the writer, whose diabetes manifests the effects of his childhood diet." In these stories Alexie introduced characters who would appear in later works, most notably Thomas Builds-the-Fire and Victor Joseph.

Another tale in *The Lone Ranger* chronicles the self-abuse of a former high school hoops star who has turned to alcohol. In this piece, Alexie sums up what it means to be "Indian" (a term he does not find objectionable) in North America in the 1990s: "...it's almost like Indians can easily survive the big stuff. Mass murder, loss of language and land rights. It's the small things that hurt the most. The white waitress who wouldn't take an order, Tonto, the Washington Redskins." After three more collections of poetry, including 1994's *Seven Mourning Songs for the Cedar Flute I Have Yet to Learn to Play*, Alexie expanded the characters of *The Lone Ranger* into a

full-fledged novel, *Reservation Blues*. Its plot begins with the sudden appearance of a renowned bluesman on the reservation, who brings with him a guitar allegedly possessing otherworldly powers. The instrument was given to him in a deal he once made with "the Gentleman," and now he wants to get rid of it. Thomas takes it off his hands and forms an R&B act called Coyote Springs. Success, groupies from Spokane, and a record deal arrive in quick succession, but things also go awry, and badly. In a critique of the work for *People*, Pam Lambert termed *Reservation Blues* a "high-flying, humor-spiked tale of culture and assimilation." A *Publishers Weekly* critic found it "hilarious but poignant, filled with enchantments yet dead-on accurate with regard to modern Indian life."

Alexie's next work and second novel, *Indian Killer*, offered far less amusement. Published by Atlantic Monthly Press in 1996 (by this point in his career, Alexie also had well-known literary agent Morgan Entekin behind him), *Indian Killer* proceeds to the city of Seattle, where a gruesome serial killer is scalping white men and leaving owl feathers—a death symbol for the indigenous peoples of the Northwest—near the corpses. An antagonistic local radio host fans the flames among Seattle's more impressionable, racist citizens, and the city's indigent Indian men soon become the target of violent retaliatory attacks. Some begin to suspect a quiet construction worker named John Smith of the murders. Smith is Indian, but was adopted into a white family as a baby; the dislocation he feels from his culture extends so far that he begins to become clearly dislocated from society and any sense of human community at all as an adult. Other characters in the novel offer Alexie a chance to skewer pop culture and the academic world's depiction of Indians as wise and deeply spiritual. A novelist in *Indian Killer* named Jack Wilson, who becomes involved in trying to solve the killing spree, falsely claims Indian blood and writes popular detective fiction featuring sagacious sleuth Aristotle Little Hawk. Another character butts heads with a Native Studies professor at her college, at one point telling him, "I'm not some demure little Indian woman healer talking spider this, spider that."

Alexie faced some criticism for *Indian Killer* for both the gruesome subject matter and the lampooning of Native-loving non-Natives. "This is sad and eloquently written,"

assessed *Time's* John Skow. "It is also ugly." Skow found Alexie's novel "septic with what clearly seems to be his own unappeasable fury." *New York Times Book Review* writer Richard E. Nicholls was more charitable in his assessment. "It's difficult not to make 'Indian Killer' sound unrelievedly grim," noted Nicholls, who explained that Alexie was skilled at injecting mordant humor into the proceedings. "It's also difficult not to make the novel seem more angry than reflective," Nicholls continued, "But Sherman Alexie is too good a writer.... His vigorous prose, his haunted, surprising characters and his meditative exploration of the sources of human identity transform into a resonant tragedy what might have been a melodrama in less assured hands."

### **Controversial Author**

Alexie's success has not brought him enthusiastic acclaim back in Wellpinit, either. He has endured criticism from the Native community itself. A librarian at the Salish–Kootenai College on the Spokane Reservation, Mikki Samuels, explained to Timothy Egan in the *New York Times Magazine* that "what people on the reservation feel is that he's making fun of them. It's supposed to be fiction, but we all know who he's writing about. He has wounded a lot of people." Alexie's response is to attribute some of the complaints to reservation politics, which are similar to small–town politics, but does concede that some of the blame lies on himself—"I was as mouthy and opinionated as a kid as I am now," he told Egan. Outside the Native community and in the greater literary one, Alexie has also made enemies for his involvement or instigation of literary feuds.

Alexie continued to write poetry, give readings, and contemplate offers from Hollywood producers interested in turning his fiction into feature films. Since 1993 and the success of *The Lone Ranger* short stories, he had listened to pitches for movie ideas that planned to leave him out of the writing process altogether. One scheme even wanted to erase the Indian heritage of the characters altogether. Yet a combination of luck and perseverance eventually yielded production funds, a deal with Miramax, and the 1998 release of *Smoke Signals*. Chris Eyre, a filmmaker of Cheyenne–Arapaho heritage, had read Alexie's *Lone Ranger* stories and simply called up the author

himself one day; they found financing for its paltry \$1.7 million budget via the Seattle multimedia firm that had once taken a chance on *sex, lies, and videotape*, one of the first commercially successful independent films.

Alexie penned the screenplay himself and was insistent that his characters be played by Native actors. His doggedness resulted in the first commercial feature film written, directed, and acted by a Native American cast and crew—but "the film is so relaxed about its characters, so much at home in their world, that we sense it's an inside job," wryly noted Chicago *Sun–Times* film critic Roger Ebert. The action opens on July 4, 1976, when much of America celebrated the Bicentennial with great hoopla; Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds–the–Fire are children. That night, a fire destroys the latter's house, killing his parents, but the head of the Josephs, Arnold, saves Thomas. As they grow into young adulthood, Thomas and Victor are not especially close. "Thomas, much like Alexie himself when he grew up on the Spokane reservation, is a storyteller ignored by the rest of the tribe," explained Egan in the *New York Times Magazine*.

Victor learns that his father, whose alcoholism eventually drove him far away from his family, has died, and Thomas offers to pay for the bus trip to Arizona to retrieve the ashes if he can come along too. Victor dislikes the talkative Thomas, but acquiesces. The taciturn Victor considers Thomas far too influenced by media and pop culture representations of Native heritage, such as the film *Dances with Wolves*. Thomas is well aware of the ironies of the situation. "The only thing more pathetic than an Indian on TV," he says at one point to Victor, "is an Indian watching an Indian on TV." Their road trip to Arizona is naturally a journey of self–discovery, but they also manage to do what they are supposed to do: bring Arnold's ashes back and scatter them near the falls of the Spokane River.

Alexie also co–produced *Smoke Signals* and composed some of the music for its soundtrack. *Time* writer Jeffrey Ressler compared him to Spike Lee. Alexie relished the idea of becoming so influential—"Spike didn't necessarily get films made as much as he inspired filmmakers to believe in themselves," Alexie said. "That's what's going

to happen here. These 13-year-old Indian kids who've been going crazy with their camcorders will finally see the possibilities." He is set to direct the film version of *Indian Killer* beginning in late 1998. "The one thing I learned making 'Smoke Signals' is that the myth of the director is just waiting to be punctured," Alexie told Lawson in the *Detroit Free Press* with characteristic fervor. "You will never see the words 'A Film by Sherman Alexie' on anything like that on any movie I'm ever involved with."

Alexie lives in Seattle with his wife and their son, and has no plan to forsake his writing career for more lucrative artistic involvements. The first member of his family not to live on the Spokane Reservation, his fame sometimes makes it difficult to visit his parents. "My friends are happy to see me," he said to Egan. "My enemies are not."

### **Recent Updates**

**April 26, 2004:** Alexie was nominated for the 2003 Los Angeles Times book award for fiction for *Ten Little Indians: Stories*. **Source:** Los Angeles Times website: <http://www.latimes.com>, April 26, 2004