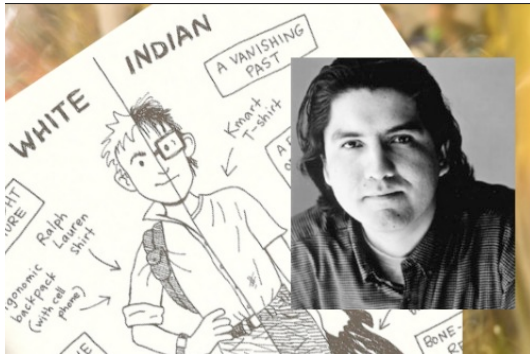


The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me by Sherman Alexie



Late summer night on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Ten Indians are playing basketball on a court barely illuminated by the streetlight above them. They will play until the brown, leather ball is invisible in the dark, They will play until an errant pass jams a finger, knocks a pair of glasses off the face, smashes a nose and draws blood. They will play until the ball bounces off the court and disappears into the shadows. This may be all you need to know about Native American literature.

*

Thesis: I have never met a Native American. Thesis repeated: I have met thousands of Indians.

*

November 1994, Manhattan, PEN American panel on Indian Literature. Two or three hundred people in the audience. Mostly non-Indians, an Indian or three. Questions and answers.

"Why do you insist on calling yourselves Indian?" asks a white woman in a nice hat. "It's so demeaning." "Listen," I say. "The word belongs to us now. We are Indians. That has nothing to do with Indians from India. We are not American Indians. We are Indians, pronounced In-din. It belongs to us. We own it and we're not going to give it back." So much has been taken from us that we hold onto the smallest things left with all the strength we have.

*

1975, Mr. Manley, the fourth grade music teacher, sets a row of musical instruments in front of us. From left to right, a flute, clarinet, French horn, trombone, trumpet, tuba, drum. We're getting our first chance to play this kind of music.

"Now," he explains, "I want all of you to line up behind the instrument you'd like to learn how to play."

Dawn, Loretta, and Karen line up behind the flute. Melissa and Michelle behind the clarinet. Lori and Willette, the French horn. All ten Indian boys line up behind the drum.

*

I made a very conscious decision to marry an Indian woman, who made a very conscious decision to marry me.

Our hope: to give birth to and raise Indian children who love themselves. That is the most revolutionary act.

*

1982: I am the only Indian student at Reardon High, an all-white school in a small farm town just outside my reservation. I am in the pizza parlor, sharing a deluxe with my white friends. We are talking and laughing. A drunk Indian walks in. He staggers to the counter and orders a beer. The waiter ignores him. We are all silent.

At our table, S is shaking her head. She leans toward us as if to share a secret.

"Man," she says, "I hate Indians."

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I am curious about the writers who identify themselves as mixed-blood Indians. Is it difficult for them to decide which container they should put their nouns and verbs into? Invisibility, after all, can be useful, as a blonde, Aryan-featured Jew in Germany might have found during WWII. Then again, I think of the horror stories that such a pale undetected Jew could tell about life during the Holocaust.

*

An Incomplete List of People I Wish Were Indian

Kareem Abdul-Jabber	Eve	Rosa Parks
Adam	Diane Fossey	Wilma Rudolph
Muhammad Ali	Jesus Christ	Sappho
Susan B. Anthony	Robert Johnson	William Shakespeare
Jimmy Carter	Helen Keller	Bruce Springsteen
Patsy Cline	Billie Jean King	Meryl Streep
D.B.Cooper	Martin Luther King, Jr.	John Steinbeck
Robert De Niro	John Lennon	Superman
Emily Dickinson	Mary Magdalene	Harriet Tubman
Isadora Duncan	Pablo Neruda	Voltaire
Amelia Earhart	Flannery O'Conner	Walt Whitman

*

1995: Summer, Seattle, Washington. I am idling at a red light when a car filled with white boys pulls up beside me. The white boy in the front passenger seat leans out his window.

"I hate you Indian motherfuckers," he screams. I quietly wait for the green light.

*

1978: David, Randy, Steve, and I decide to form a reservation doowop group, like the Platters. During recess, we practice behind the old tribal school. Steve, a falsetto, is the best singer.

I am the worst singer, but have the deepest voice, and am therefore an asset.

"What songs do you want to sing?" asks David.

"Tracks of My Tears," says Steve, who always decides these kind of things.

We sing, desperately trying to remember the lyrics to that song. We try to remember other songs.

For some reason, we all know the lyrics to "Monster Mash."

"We need a name for our group," says Randy.

"How about The Warriors?" I ask.

Everybody agrees. We've watched a lot of Westerns.

We sing "Monster Mash" over and over. We want to be famous. We want all the little Indian girls to shout our names. Finally, after days of practice, we are ready for our debut. Walking in line, like soldiers, the four of us parade around the playground.

We sing "Monster Mash." I am in front, followed by Steve, David, then Randy, who is the shortest, but the toughest Indian fighter our reservation has ever known. We sing. We are The Warriors. All the other Indian boys and girls line up behind us as we march.

We are heroes. We are loved. I sing with everything I have inside of me: pain, happiness, anger, depression, heart, soul, small intestine. I sing and am rewarded with people who listen.

That is why I am a poet.

*

The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me by Sherman Alexie

I remember watching Richard Nixon, during the Watergate affair, as he held a press conference and told the entire world that he was not a crook.

For the first time, I understood that storytellers could be bad people.

*

Poetry = Anger x Imagination

*

Every time I venture into the bookstore, I find another book about Indians. There are hundreds of books about Indians published every year, yet so few are written by Indians. I gather all the books written by Indians. I discover:

- A book written by a person who identifies as mixed-blood will sell more copies than a book who identifies as strictly Indian.
- A book written by a non-Indian will sell more copies than a book written by either a mixed-blood or an Indian writer.
- Reservation Indian writers are rarely published in any form.
- A book about Indian life in the past, whether written by a non-Indian, mixed-blood, or Indian will sell more copies than a book about Indian life in the twentieth century.
- Books about the Sioux sell more copies than all of the books written about other tribes combined.
- Mixed-blood writers often write about any tribe which interests them, whether or not they are related to that tribe.
- Writers who use obvious Indian names, such as Eagle Woman and Pretty Shield, are usually non-Indian.
- Non-Indian writers usually say "Great Spirit," "Mother Earth," "Two-Legged, Four-Legged, and Winged." Mixed-blood writers usually say "Creator," "Mother Earth," "Two-Legged, Four-Legged, and Winged." Indian writers usually say "God," "Mother Earth," "Human Being, Dog, and Bird."
- If a book about Indians contains no dogs, then it was written by a non-Indian or mixed-blood writer.
- If on a cover of a book there are winged animals who aren't supposed to have wings, then it was written by a non-Indian.
- Successful non-Indian writers are viewed as well-informed about Indian life. Successful mixed-blood writers are viewed as wonderful translators of Indian life. Successful Indian writers are viewed as traditional storytellers of Indian life.
- Very few Indian and mixed-blood writers speak their tribal languages. Even fewer non-Indian writers speak their tribal languages.
- Indians often write exclusively about reservation life, even if they never lived on a reservation.
- Mixed-bloods often write exclusively about Indians, even if they grew up in non-Indian communities.
- Non-Indian writers always write about reservation life.
- Nobody has written the great urban Indian novel yet.
- Most Indians who write about Indians are fiction writers. Fiction about Indians sells.

*

The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me by Sherman Alexie

Have you stood in a crowded room where nobody looks like you? If you are white, have you stood in a room full of black people? Are you an Irish man who has strolled through the streets of Compton? If you are black, have you stood in a room full of white people? Are you an African-American man, who has played a back nine at the local country club? If you are a woman, have you stood in a room full of men? Are you Sandra Day O'Conner or Ruth Ginsberg?

Since I left the reservation, almost every room I enter is filled with people that do not look like me. There are only two million Indians in the country. We could all fit into one medium-sized city. Someone should look into it.

Often, I am most alone in bookstores where I am reading from my work. I look up from the page at white faces. This is frightening.

*

My father is an alcoholic. He used to leave us for weeks at a time to drink with his friends and cousins. I missed him so much I'd cry myself sick.

I could always tell when he was going to leave. He would be tense, quiet, unable to concentrate. He'd flip through magazines and television channels. He'd open the refrigerator door, study its contents, shut the door, and walk away. Five minutes later, he'd be back at the fridge, rearranging items on the shelves. I would follow him from place to place, trying to prevent his escape.

Once, he went into the bathroom, which had no windows, while I sat outside the only door and waited for him. I could not hear him inside. I knocked on the thin wood. I was five years old.

"Are you there?" I asked. "Are you still there?"

Every time he left, I ended up in the emergency room. But I always got well and he always came back. He'd walk in the door without warning. We'd forgive him.

Years later, I am giving a reading at a bookstore in Spokane, Washington. There is a large crowd. I read a story about an Indian father who leaves his family for good. He moves to a city a thousand miles away. Then he dies. It is a sad story. When I finish, a woman in the front row breaks into tears.

"What's wrong?" I ask her.

"I'm so sorry about your father," she says.

"Thank you," I say, "But that's my father sitting right next to you."