

From Wellpinit to Reardan:

Sherman Alexie's Journey to the National Book Award

Sherman Alexie really can palm a basketball, just like Junior, the protagonist in his 2007 National Book Award winner, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*. Sherman proved this fact in front of a standing room only crowd at Arizona State University's Neeb Hall during a book tour appearance in October of 2007. Gifts of appreciation were given from audience members at the end, and when ASU student Natalie Tsinnjinnie presented Sherman with a maroon and gold ASU basketball, he took it in one hand and effortlessly held it out to roaring applause. Sherman had just acted out one of the most engaging chapters in the book, one in which Junior's skills on the basketball court make both friends and enemies for him, not necessarily the friends and enemies he would have expected.

Holding the collegiate-size ball at arm's length with only one hand was pretty impressive, but the most impressive thing Mr. Alexie did that night may have happened in a small classroom on the ASU campus before his advertised appearance began. Twelve students from Ira Hayes High School (IHHS) in the Gila River Indian Community had come to see the author whose books they knew almost by heart, accompanied by their English teachers, Matt Lentz and Leigh Myers. Sherman arranged to meet with them privately before the big college lecture, and in that time together they shared stories about life on the rez, and talked about his books, especially this most recent book. Sherman's stories of life on the Spokane Reservation resonated with these young members of the Akimel O'odham and Pee-Posh nations, and their stories of life in the Gila River Indian Community also

had Sherman nodding and laughing in recognition.

Sherman's approachability and infectious sense of humor were a surprise to these young readers, who weren't sure what a world famous author might be like in person. IHHS student Rene Peters, 16, said she "was really nervous to meet him but then he kept us laughing the whole time. This book is now my favorite book that I've ever read and I can't wait for more." Christine Lewis, 16, who had seen pictures of Sherman with longer hair than he had that day, said, "I was expecting him to have really long hair. I was surprised that he was such a cool guy." Victor Pablo, 18, was also uncertain of what this famous author's reaction might be to questions from high school students, but he was pleasantly surprised: "I was nervous to ask him why he used the name Victor in his stories. He told me that he was almost named Victor and that's why he chose it. He's been a real inspiration to me to read more and to start writing myself."

Laughter surrounds Sherman Alexie wherever he goes, and humor is a powerful tool for him as he makes sense of life experiences which were anything but funny. Wherever he speaks, whether he is reading book chapters or giving his take on life, audiences spend most of the time laughing. In the Alexie family, however, Sherman was not considered the funny one: "If you asked my siblings or my mother who the funny one in the family is, it's not me. They would describe me as the depressed one. I think in its origins, my humor is a defense mechanism. By using humor publicly, I may be showing people how to use it as defense mechanism, or maybe as a weapon, too."

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main character, Junior, two lives which are nearly inseparable due to the mostly autobiographical nature of the book. Sherman tells these stories of his life, no matter how difficult or hurtful they seem, with his characteristic touch of humor. His early years (and Junior’s) were fraught with adversity, nearly fatal adversity. He was born a hydrocephalic, which doctors believed would either kill him or leave him hopelessly impaired. He was the recipient of surgery after surgery, including the insertion of a shunt into his skull to divert fluid that was applying tremendous pressure on his brain. Early on, doctors explained to his mother that, even if he lived, Sherman would most likely be a vegetable, to which, he tells us, she replied, “What kind of vegetable?” This is especially funny now, considering that Sherman grew up to be so successful, but it surely was a heart rending time for his mother and for their family.

How can the heart rending story of a little boy’s battle for his life be so funny? It’s all in how he tells the tale. As Junior narrates his life story, it is always Sherman telling his own story, sometimes adding a few fictional details, but mostly sticking to what really happened: Junior (Sherman) describes the physical maladies of his early years and the resulting harassment:

. . . my hands and feet were huge. My feet were a size eleven in the third grade! With my big feet and pencil body, I looked like a capital *L* walking down the road.

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As the keynote speaker for the 2007 ALAN Workshop, Sherman talked a little about winning the National Book Award and about moving into the young adult book world, but mostly he talked about his life and the life of his

And my skull was enormous.

Epic.

My head was so big that little Indian skulls orbited around it. Some of the kids called me Orbit. And other kids called me Globe. The bullies would pick me up, spin me in circles, put their finger down on my skull, and say, “I want to go there.” (3)

Being picked on for his physical differences made Junior/Sherman tough, an official member of the “Black-Eye-of-the-Month Club,” (5) and accustomed to having to fight every day. Among the “UNOFFICIAL AND UNWRITTEN (but you had better know them or you’re going to get beaten twice as hard) SPOKANE INDIAN RULES OF FISTICUFFS” (61) were number 1: “If somebody insults you, then you have to fight him” and number 10: “If you get in a fight with somebody who is sure to beat you up, then you must throw the first punch because it’s the only punch you’ll ever throw” (62). When Junior/Sherman first arrives at Reardan High School, the only Native American student in the whole student body, he applies these rules the first time a big farm boy, named Roger, makes a racial joke about Native Americans:

So I punched Roger in the face.

He wasn’t laughing when he landed on his ass. And he wasn’t laughing when his nose bled like red fireworks.

I struck some fake karate pose because I figured Roger’s gang was going to attack me for bloodying their leader.

But they just stared at me.

They were *shocked*. (65)

And Junior/Sherman was in. He didn’t understand why, but he had just won a place of respect among the boys in the school. He is completely mystified by the course of events, but his grandmother explains:

“I think it means he respects you,” she said.

“Respect? No way!”

“Yes way! You see, you men and boys are like packs of wild dogs. This giant boy is the alpha male of the school, and you’re the new dog, so he pushed you around a bit to see how tough you are.” (71)

Junior/Sherman would go on to be a hero in the school, not so much for fighting, but for two other things: basketball and academics. He would, in fact, become a major contributor to Reardan’s regional prominence in athletics and academics.

It was Reardan's prominence in sports and academics that motivated the real Sherman Alexie to enroll in high school there and leave his community school at Wellpinit. The pinnacle moment in this decision comes, in the book, when Junior finds his mother's name in his geometry textbook, and he realizes that a whole generation had gone by, thirty years or so, and no new books had been purchased for the Wellpinit School. Junior hurls the book across the room, smashing his math teacher, Mr. P, in the nose. Mr. P surprises Junior by understanding his disillusionment with the school. Mr. P expresses his own disappointment with how reservation schools have failed to make the dreams of young people available to them, including Junior's own sister, who could have become a successful writer. It is in this conversation that Junior comes to the realization that his hope in life lies off the reservation. After a conversation with his parents about hope, Junior announces that he is going to Reardan to school next year.

Oddly enough, writing about himself in the guise of Junior may have helped Sherman make his real life story more plausible to the reader. As he explains:

Part of the reason I wrote about leaving Wellpinit to go to school in Reardan as a novel and not as a memoir is because the real story doesn't seem very believable. In the novel I have the incident with the teacher to sort of push him, but that didn't really happen. The truth, that a self-possessed thirteen-year-old came home from school and said, 'I gotta get out of here' just didn't seem realistic, especially to leave the rez that way. In real life, the brain damage did something to me. I had learned to fight to live, and somehow I knew that I had to leave to live and if I stayed, I'd die. Since then, thousands of my peers have died, so it must have been true. My brother has lost five best friends. He's three years older than I am; he's forty-three and already has lost five good friends. He makes jokes about being like Dirty Harry, Harry Callahan, whenever he gets a partner, they die. That's my brother, Harry Callahan of the rez.

Life on the rez also means basketball. The essence of Sherman Alexie's life is in this book, and basketball runs deep here, just as it has in other stories he has written. In fact, Sherman finds a way to talk about basketball in most presentations or conversations or even on his book tour blog (<http://www.fallsapart.com/FlightBlog.htm>). This isn't just a personal thing, it's a cultural thing. Sherman explains,

Basketball is huge on the rez. Basketball is actually one of

the strongest aspects of our culture, especially intertribal culture. It's more intense and certainly more common than powwows. It has that warrior appeal that modern society doesn't provide to native men anymore. Basketball ended up being a sort of substitute warrior culture. I played my whole life, even as an adult, until I had kids and couldn't go out of town to tournaments anymore.

My father never missed a basketball game if I was playing in it. He was a man who loved deeply and loved us deeply, but also one who could disappear for days, which meant he missed lots of important days in our lives, like birthdays and sometimes Christmas, but

he never, ever missed an organized basketball game. This was perhaps the strongest bond between us. He might be gone without explanation for three weeks, but when a basketball game began and the music started and the team ran out onto the floor, I would look up into the stands where he always sat and there he'd be, sometimes pretty damned haggard, but he'd be up there.

My dad was a heck of player himself. We would sometimes go to parks in Spokane or Coeur D'Alene and play basketball two-on-two against people who would mistakenly see us as just a young kid and an old guy. We'd kill 'em because Dad was so good. We didn't play for money, but we would get into pickup games so easily because people just assumed "Indians can't jump" and we would beat everybody.

In some sense, *The Absolutely True Diary* is my father's story. His dad died on Okinawa in WWII, and his mom died six months later. My dad and his sister were raised on the war death benefit, which enabled them to get a good house in Coeur D'Alene off the rez and for them to go to a Catholic school. They were the only Indians at the school. He would move to the rez after high school and was totally rez from then on, but his high school experience was a lot like mine and like Junior's. When I went on my first book tour in 1993 all sorts of his classmates from the Catholic school would show up thinking that I was him because I'm Sherman Alexie, Jr., and they were in no way surprised that my father would turn out to be an author. It seemed completely natural to them that he would be doing that, but then I would explain who I was and they would ask what he was doing. He was a hero to them, these people who

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were now university professors and doctors and successful at different things, and knowing him in high school, they figured he was very successful. I would have to tell them that he was a randomly employed, blue collar, reservation alcoholic. I think in a lot of ways I ended up having the life he was supposed to have. I look exactly like him.

Just as basketball is a cultural element of reservation, so are many other everyday sorts of things. One of the cultural phenomena that Sherman brings up in his public appearances, one that generates waves of laughter, especially from Native American audiences, is the “rez accent,” a pattern of soft speech that has definitely recognizable inflections. Anyone who has seen *Smoke Signals*, the film that Shadow Catcher Entertainment and Sherman made from his book,

I think it’s really liberating for young people to hear a successful Indian adult speak using their syntax and vocabulary. It validates them and their life experiences.

Tonto and the Lone Ranger Fistfight in Heaven, would recognize the accent in Thomas Builds-the-Fire’s mantra of “Hey, Victor,” as he initiates conversation with the story’s other protagonist, Victor Joseph. Sherman wrote those lines and now he hears those two words almost everywhere he goes: “When Indian kids recognize me out in the world, they often come up and start a

conversation by saying, ‘Hey, Victor,’ and I can’t help but smile.”

Honoring Indian English is important to Sherman:

Part of the issue in the Indian world is that when you’re talking about adults, mentors, or public figures, we often distance ourselves from our people in a way. Because our success comes in the non-Indian world, we end up, culturally, speaking a non-Indian English and leaving that other English for kids. I think it’s really liberating for young people to hear a successful Indian adult speak using their syntax and vocabulary. It validates them and their life experiences, especially when I start talking about being a rez kid—growing up in a HUD house across the street from the tribal school, I’m as Indian as it gets—and for me to be doing what I’m doing and still retain that Indian-ness, which is not just about dancing or singing or that kind of culture but about the day-to-day way of communicating, daily communication skills of our indigenous culture. That’s important. Not just to look like them, but to sound like them.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian is

largely about striding two cultures. The opening dedication to the book reads, “To Wellpinit and Reardan, my hometowns.” Like most of the specifics of the book, the towns of Wellpinit (on the Spokane Reservation) and Reardan (just off the reservation at the junction of Washington State Highway 231 and US Highway 2) are absolutely true (pun intended). When the real Sherman Alexie left the Spokane Reservation, just as his alter ego, Junior, does in the book, he was faced with a completely different culture from the one he had known his whole life. And they were faced with him, too. Junior makes it work, just as Sherman did in real life, and it is hard to imagine a more challenging human endeavor, but Sherman has a strongly held philosophy about the meeting of cultures: “When you speak of culture, if you make an analogy with the heart, it’s dangerous to think that you have to be monogamous. Instead, you need to be able to fall in love quickly and easily with other cultures.” Both Sherman and Junior were accepted into the hearts of their new tribes, as Sherman puts it, in the world outside the rez.

Sherman Alexie has found his way into the hearts of people all over the world. He appeals to everyone, all sorts of people, all sorts of readers and movie goers. He laughs and explains,

People look at me and make a connection; they intuitively believe that I am half of whatever they are. Humor plays a big part, but also I appeal to universal aspects of life, like the feeling of being trapped by this or that. In my keynote speech for the ALAN Workshop I talked about feeling trapped by expectations as a teenager, and I think everybody feels trapped by expectations in life, not just teenagers, but everybody. But another reason that I appeal to people is that everybody loves Indians. They really do. My wife’s father told her again and again while she was growing up, ‘You’ll be OK in life; you’re smart, and everybody loves Indians.’

That’s one of the things I try to teach Indian kids today. Our own elders have taught us that we’re hated, and the truth is that we’re not. People love Indians. Everywhere I go in the world, Indian people are admired. It worries me when people tell Indian kids to leave their hearts behind when they leave the rez because that implies that the world is a dangerous place for our hearts and it’s not. There are so many allies out there, and if you don’t bring your heart, you won’t find them.

Sherman has always loved books, and his earliest memories of books are still strong many years later.

I have a vivid memory of when I was six years old and pulled *The Snowy Day*, by Ezra Jack Keats, off the shelf in the elementary school library. On the cover was a dark boy in a red coat out in the snow. I instantly figured he was Indian, he wasn't, but I thought he was. I connected to that main character almost instantly in lots of ways. He wandered through the snow alone, and I spent a lot of time alone when I was little. I was very solitary, so the introverted nature of that kid wandering around, making snow angels by himself helped me to empathize or identify with him, not just the fact that he was brown but he spent all that time alone. Even after all that time alone, though, he ended up back at home with his mom. I connected with that feeling of wanting the adventure but always knowing there was a place to return to, somebody waiting to give you cocoa and a hot bath. That book is a poem, and I think that was my first experience with poetry.

I have always loved books. My advice to anybody is to read at least a book a week. No matter where you are, no matter where you're at, books can save your life. That's the key. Look at anybody, anybody in any field who's doing well, and you're looking at somebody who reads like crazy.

Books made a huge difference in Sherman's life, and now his books are making a huge difference in the lives of others. The best young adult literature helps kids to make sense of their lives, including *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*, which has so far won:

- 2008 American Indian Youth Literature Award
- 2007 National Book Award for Young People's Literature
- Publishers Weekly 2007 Best Books of the Year—Children's Fiction
- The New York Times Notable Children's Books of 2007
- National Parenting Publication Gold Winner 2007
- Amazon.com Best Books of 2007
- School Library Journal Best Books of 2007
- Kirkus Reviews Best Young Adult Books of 2007
- Horn Book Fanfare Best Books of 2007
- The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books Blue Ribbon Winner
- Kansas City Star's Top 100 Books of the Year

When asked what he thinks it is about this book that helps kids make sense of their own lives, Sherman laughs and says,

Well, my initial response is to say that if they read the book, they should think that if this poor-ass reservation kid can make it, it should be easy for them, living in the suburbs.

They won't have to go as far. Seriously though, I think it's Junior's resiliency. I also think it's the fact that the book takes young people seriously. The opposite of this is censorship, which arises out of not taking kids seriously, which I hate. Chris Crutcher gave a great talk about censorship [for the ALAN Workshop], and I believe censorship is really about condescension. It's the notion that kids don't have complicated emotional lives, don't have complicated responses to a complicated life. Censorship is an attempt to make kids and their lives simple. Being accustomed to that sort of treatment, kids just respond well to anything that takes them seriously.

When asked about his reaction to the announcement that he had won the National Book Award,

Sherman laughed and said,

I vomited a little bit of lamb when they announced my name. In the final minute, when they started doing the announcing, I got hot-faced and felt like I was going to faint. They said my name and I vomited a little bit. The moment was intense. It was like the Oscars, but everybody had progressive lens—it was the near-sighted Oscars. My oldest friends in the business were there, the people I worked with on my adult novels before trying my hand at a young adult book, so that was great. My

new friends and my old friends were there. I didn't realize how many people I had come to know in publishing, but I knew 200 or so people who were there. I realized at that moment that I was getting an award for a book about finding new tribes and I realized I was a member of a tribe I hadn't even thought about consciously, the publishing tribe.

It is this realization that we are all members of many tribes, not just one, that Sherman ends his talks with lately, and he ends the book that way, too. Actually, the very end of the book is a basketball game, but just before that, Junior/Sherman says:

I realized that I might be a lonely Indian boy, but I was not alone in my loneliness. There were millions of other Americans who had left their birthplaces in search of a dream.

I realized that, sure, I was a Spokane Indian. I belonged to that tribe. But I also belonged to the tribe of American immigrants. And to the tribe of basketball players. And to the tribe of bookworms. (217)

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He goes on to name many other tribes to which he belongs: “the tribe of poverty,” “the tribe of small-town kids,” and “the tribe of boys who really miss their friends” (217).

Surely adolescence is mostly about figuring out which tribes you belong to and how to follow your dreams. We thank Sherman Alexie for sharing the story of how he did just that.

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Call for 2008 Halle Award Nominations

The NCTE Richard W. Halle Award for Outstanding Middle Level Educator honors a middle level educator who has consistently worked to improve the quality of middle school education and middle school educators, especially in the English language arts. Originally established in 1996 by the Junior High/Middle School Assembly, this award pays special tribute to the person who has worked to improve schools and schooling for the middle level—teacher, principal, college faculty, curriculum specialist, or supervisor.

Nomination packet information can be found on the NCTE website at <http://www.ncte.org/middle/awards/halle> and must be postmarked no later than **June 1, 2008**. Results will be announced in September 2008, and the award will be presented at the 2008 Annual Convention in San Antonio, Texas, during the Middle Level Get-Together.