



One Stick Song

Sherman Alexie

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This book is funny, right on the money, yet terribly sad: welcome to the tradition of tragicomedy. Welcome to Indian Country. Here the Greek art form reaches it's zenith, perfected American style, where the ridiculous, tragic, hilarious, and sublime combine infinitely.

In his most recent publication, Alexie brings readers once again into the America of the First Nations, specifically the Spokane "rez" of his childhood: the third world reality of all reservations (before casinos), the saddest funniest place in the United States. Alexie is driven, prolific, young, and Indian. He is an unusual and very welcome addition to the literary scene, arriving into a relative vacuum of authentic Indian authors and works. His repertoire includes short stories, fiction, poetry, screen plays, and the first ever big screen motion picture written, directed, and acted by Indians: Smoke Signals.

If still using the word Indian is an issue for the reader, Alexie addresses this on the very first page of One Stick Song. During a PEN American panel on Indian Literature, Alexie, along with other Indian writers spoke to a mostly non-Indian audience of two or three hundred people. "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, pronounced Indian. 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."

Alexie reveals much with his sweet sarcasm that is endearing in its honest truth. On the subject of often confusing family ties in Indian country: "They are my cousins, meaning we are related in the Indian way. My father drank beer with their father for most of two decades, and that is enough to make us relatives. Indians gather relatives like firewood, protection against the cold."

There are tough and gritty parts to this book, brutal reality, and rough language. There is the close bond of family and elders in juxtaposition with dysfunctional relationships between family members, the rez, and the "townies," the Tribe, and the U.S. Government. This dysfunction filters down to the younger residents of the reservation as is illustrated in "The Mice War." The necessity to laugh in the face of avoidable and spectacular fatalities, to keep going is a very real part of Indian life.

This book is an important link in the chain of U.S. literary history, one that has been weak if not absent for centuries. As in Indian country, the humorous outweighs insurmountable grief, and Alexie hits the mark with deadly accuracy. "If a book about Indians contains no dogs, then it was written by a non-Indian...."

GABRIELLE SHAW (September / October 2000)

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