

Identity heft

In Sherman Alexie's stories, Native Americans struggle under the weight of cultural anguish

BY MIKE WOLD
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Sherman Alexie has to rank as the premier writer of the Pacific Northwest. This might be an odd statement to make about someone whose literary work is almost entirely populated by Native Americans — most of them from his own Spokane tribe — but the tension between the west-of-the-mountains cities and the east-of-the-mountains country, and between poor and working-class people and affluent high-tech professionals, is a theme that plays out in Alexie's stories and novels.

His stories almost always have to do with what is authentic, about whether the truth that hurts is preferable to the lie that sustains you.

"Blasphemy," Alexie's latest collection of stories, embodies these contradictions. It's a mixture of 15 previously published and 16 new stories, almost all having to do with how to be authentic in an inauthentic world: "Indians were obsessed with authenticity. Colonized, genocided, exiled, Indians formed their identity by questioning the identities of other Indians. Self-hating, self-doubting." He continues, "We are people exiled by other exiles. ... We who were once indigenous to this land must immigrate into its culture."

For the most part, Alexie's stories keep the reader in this tension, implying that there is no answer, other than the accommodations each person finds within his or her heart. Authenticity is an abstraction and perhaps an impossibility in this society. But the attempt to do so creates both humor and pathos.

Almost half the stories in the collection have been published elsewhere, so it's not surprising that some of the best are the old ones. To my mind, the outstanding story in this collection is "Search Engine" (pun obviously intended), originally published in the collection "Ten Little Indians," about Corliss, a young Spokane woman whose passion for poetry gets her into Eastern Washington University. There, a slim book of poems, purportedly by another Spokane Indian named Harlan Atwater, literally falls off the library shelf in front of her. The problem is nobody on the reservation, including the tribal historian, has ever heard of him — and there is no Atwater family on the reservation. Corliss' search for this poet, somebody who could validate her own ambitions and who seems to speak authentically, could have ended when she realizes he is a fraud. But instead, his own story of how he became a fraud speaks truth about the Native American experience.

Truth and falsehood are other themes running through the stories. In "Idolatry," the shortest story in the collection (and one of the new ones), a girl realizes "In this world, we must love the liars, or be unloved." In "Do You Know Where I Am?," a woman decides to marry a man in spite of

his taking all the credit for a cat they saved together. The story, one of the few with an unambiguously positive ending, is about how they love each other in spite of each of them breaking faith with the other at some point.

In Alexie's stories, what is true and worthwhile is clearly different in white and Native American societies. But pathos exists because the Native American way of living does not work in our dominant (largely white) society. In "What You Pawn I Will Redeem," Deuce, a homeless Spokane man on the streets of Seattle, sets out to "win" back his grandmother's regalia from a pawn shop. In 24 hours, he is given, earns or wins part of the money, then spends it or gives it away until he returns to the pawn shop with less than he'd had the day before. He even cadges 50 free Real Change newspapers from the "Big Boss" at the paper, only to dump 45 of them after selling a handful. In an unexpected twist, he is successful in his quest, as if generosity is its own reward, echoing traditions in Northwest cultures. At the same time, the reader can't lose sight of the fact that he's a homeless alcoholic, and for a moment, two ways that such a person can be seen — spendthrift or generous — become clear.

The 16 new stories comprise less than a

quarter of the book, with four of them three pages or less and none more than 16 pages. There are a few gems, but in general they don't add a lot to Alexie's body of work. While he's a successful poet, good with the memorable phrase, his prose doesn't create the same impact in a two- or three-page story that it does in works with a longer plot.

With these new stories, Alexie seems to be moving deeper into his meditation on being Indian — and human — in a society that has lost its connection with nature. Thus, "Green World" hits hard with its evocation of a wind-powered future that, however green, still doesn't respect all life. In one of the longer stories, "Cry Cry Cry," the narrator's cousin takes revenge on an abusive white man by shooting him. The narrator turns his cousin in to the police, but then he takes on the cousin's role doing war dances. "But I wasn't dancing for war. I was dancing for my soul and for the soul of my tribe. I was dancing for what we Indians used to be and who we might become again."

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