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Sherman Alexie
Reading & Booksigning
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BOOKS BY SUZI STEFFEN

The Past is Never Dead

Alexie and Hogan weave memory, history

Sherman Alexie's new novel, *Flight*, makes explicit what teachers of his earlier work have always known: Young adults read Alexie desperately, searching for answers to questions about their own identities, seeking to learn that others have been able to take their horrific and ecstatic experiences and meld them into a coherent personality. *Flight*, explicitly published as a YA novel (Alexie's first novel since the weak *Indian Killer* came out in 1996), tells the first-person story of an angry young boy and his violent desires — and his eventual redemption.

Bounced from foster home to foster home after his mother dies, Zits never gets the love he needs. Battered and abused in some homes and simply mistreated in others, kicked around by his classmates, Zits hates himself and his vanished father. "Yes, I am Irish and Indian, which would be the coolest blend in the world if my parents were around to teach me how to be Irish and Indian," he says. "But they're not here ... so I'm a blank sky."

And nature abhors a vacuum. A runaway white boy named Justice convinces Zits that the two of them can get back at the world in a *real* way — that is, using guns. Justice melts away at the moment of engagement, and Zits blazes away in a Seattle bank alone.

But time, in Alexie's writing, is malleable, and Zits finds himself waking up in a different body, the first of several *Quantum Leap*-like moments. Each person whose body he inhabits has something to teach him, and in some cases, he slightly influences events. When he returns to the time just before he pulls out his guns, he makes a new decision. Both young adult librarians and book critics have mixed feelings about *Flight*; it's not the best-written YA book on the shelves. One librarian said, "great idea, clunky execution." And perhaps it's a bit didactic, as *Seattle Weekly*'s Brian Miller wrote in an extremely snotty review.

Yet what I've always heard from members of various Native tribes is that the massive loss of historical connection can cause problems for Native youth. So when Alexie forces Zits down the path of history,

where he learns about trauma and violence and loneliness; where he ends up, finally, inside the brain and body of his alcoholic, homeless father, the author knows what he's doing. Zits, whose character is written in first person, needs some way to get inside the heads of other people. Learning to think about the feelings and thoughts of

others is a constant project of identity formation in the teen years, and it's almost always an issue for characters in YA novels. So *Flight*, while imperfect, still serves as a decent YA novel, far too few of which are written by Native people or have interesting Native characters. Alexie reads from *Flight* at 7 pm Monday, May 14, in 150 Columbia on the UO campus.

One nigh-on perfect book about a Native young adult coming of age by

learning about family and history is Linda Hogan's 1995 novel *Solar Storms*. That *Solar Storms* didn't win major awards (beyond a Colorado Book Award) has always bemused me. Angel, the 17-year-old narrator of *Solar Storms*, is scarred emotionally and physically by her mother, and she

has also bounced around many foster homes where she's not welcome. In a last-ditch chance, she ends up back in Adam's Rib, the village where her mother grew up. She finds that as she connects with her grandmother, great-grandmother and others in the community, not to mention the land and water themselves,

some of her emotional scars heal. But Hogan interweaves Angel's story with the tale of the community protesting an electrical plant project and the impact it would have on the community's way of life. This makes *Solar Storms* a novel with sweeping scope. Hogan's gorgeous prose deserves wide acclaim. Her other books, from the novel *Mean Spirit* to her 1993 poetry collection *The Book of Medicines* to more recent essays and memoirs, cement her legacy as a writer. She comes to Corvallis for OSU's wonderful Native American Philosophies series at 6:30 pm Wednesday, May 23, in Gilfillan Auditorium on the OSU campus.

EW



BOOK NOTES: Angela and Jerry Ross' Poetic Hoohaw Celebration, 5:30 pm 5/11, Tsunami Books. Nicki Scully and Linda Star Wolf celebrate the release of *Shamanic Mysteries of Egypt*, 5 pm 5/12, Tsunami Books. Jonathan Balcombe discusses *Pleasurable Kingdom*, 2 pm 5/13, Building 17, LCC. William L. Sullivan reads from *The Case of Einstein's Violin*, 7 pm 5/15, Downtown Library. Sally-Jo Bowman reads from *No Footprints in the Sand: A Memoir of Kalaupapa*, 7 pm 5/16, Knight Library, UO. **UO Kidd Program for Creative Writing** students read their work, 7 pm 5/16, Tsunami Books.