

# The Sweet Science of being Sherman Alexie

**ALEXIE continued from front page**

before continuing. "I think he smells really good," he continued for her to repeat in signs. "I wish he weren't stading so close to me. He's making me sweat." He added for the audience, "You can say anything in sign and it looks great: 'Please chainsaw my legs off,'" he said.

His success on stage also included his powerful presence and the way he used physical humor. Alexie was in the second row of the audience when introduced. Later, as he was warming to his story, he came to a break point and paced in circles like a cat. Another time, he slunk back behind the curtain and poked his head out like a kid in trouble. (He was showing how Indians respond to men in uniform.) Then, there was the walk down the airplane aisle with alto-

gether too much of some kind of flu bubbling up inside him.

"In case you came here to see a traditional Indian," he said at the start, "you better leave now."

Which is ironic in Alexie's case,

*"I'm always amazed that white people turn to us for spirituality. Have you been to a rez?"*

~ Sherman Alexie  
during his two-hour show at OSU

because this author of 16 books — including *I Would Steal Horses*, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, *Reservation Blues*, *Indian Killer*, *Ten Little In-*

*dians* and the movies, *Smoke Signals* and *The Business of Fancy Dancing* (many available in the Tribal library) — is among today's most acclaimed Indian writers.

Joyce Carol Oates, writing in *The*

writerly and "spiritual" Native American contemporaries N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silo, and Louise Erdrich. Sherman Alexie is the bad boy among them, mocking, self-mocking, unpredictable, unassimilable, reminding us of the young Philip Roth whose controversial works of fiction "The Conversion of the Jews" and *Portnoy's Complaint* outraged an older generation for whom anything Jewish had to be sacrosanct.

In his monologue at OSU last month, he showed all of this.

"I'm always amazed that white people turn to us for spirituality," he said. "Have you been to a rez?"

Or, on that rant against vegans, he said, "Indians also think we're equal to the animals. Well, I'll quit eating meat when you get a cow out here to beat me at a poetry slam. Only so many words rhyme with 'Mooo.' I mean, yes, we're

supposed to be better stewards; yes, we're supposed to take care of the earth; yes, we're supposed to honor the sacrifices made by the animals; yes yes yes yes yes, but dammit, we're in charge, and you know why? It's because of these," and he held out his thumbs.

He said that even vegans distinguish between the value of animals and vegetables because they eat vegetables. "Maybe you think that carrots are less important than cows. I think they're equal, especially in a sauce."

But he was clearly angry at their efforts. "How self-centered, how arrogant," he said. "Imagine the awesome privilege of living in a society where you get to choose what you eat at each and every meal...When I was a kid, I was a vegetarian and a vegan for long stretches," he said. "I was a commodity cheese-atarian."

While Alexie ripped through insult (to men wearing little pony tails, he said, "Give it up. You look like an idiot! The women are all laughing at you!") after joke ("I'm a liberal. I'm a lefty, pacifist, Commie-bastard who hates liberals. I can't stand us...if somebody tries to blow up the plane I'm on, I'm going to kill them and eat them!") after observation ("Homophobia is the only hatred that doesn't make sense. Find me a country that was invaded by gays") after advice (in planning for anti-war demonstrations, he suggested a dress code), it was easy to forget that he had a personal story in process.

In the end, it was all just window dressing for Alexie to describe the complex nature of the love he has for his father.

"My father was a lifelong alcoholic," he said, "but he was a kind, sweet, shy man." He said that the



**Signing** — During a private dinner by invitation only, Alexie signed a poster for Roxanne Williams (Klamath).

Photos by Toby McClary

## Interview with Sherman Alexie

LaSells Stewart Center at OSU



Photo by Toby McClary

**Writer's Angst** — *Smoke Signal's* Staff Writer Ron Karten (right) shares a laugh with Sherman Alexie during an interview at OSU.

**Question:** They say that it's a great curse for a family to have a member that is a fiction writer. What does your family think of your work?

**Answer:** My mom and dad, before he passed away, sat in the third row of every reading (I gave) in Spokane or the area. My immediate family was great with it. I've got cousins who had problems but, you know, who cares?

**Question:** When you write, do you have anybody or bodies in mind that you are writing to?

**Answer:** I'm not going to be happy until every person on the planet reads one of my books. So, everybody.

**Question:** Describe the level of fame and fortune that you feel you've got in your life now, and tell me what it's meant to you.

**Answer:** Laughter. It's a relative thing. There's literary fame, I guess. And I'm rich for an Indian. I make a great living doing what I love the most and I don't have to compromise.

**Question:** How do you feel about the big decisions you've made, that have shaped your life?

**Answer:** Best thing I ever did was leave the rez.

**Question:** How old were you when you left?

**Answer:** I went to the White High School on the border. Still lived on the rez, but, I left school there for eighth grade, I was 14?

**Question:** And what were the features of having left that made it so good?

**Answer:** I had no idea that dysfunction had become traditional until I left.

**Question:** Is the literary figure you've become at all similar to the literary person you intended to become?

**Answer:** I have no control over that. I write what I write and whatever happens, happens.

**Question:** Are you heading off in new directions?

**Answer:** I've got a book of short stories that are completely about white people. And then I just signed a deal for three kids books.

**Question:** Are these be the first kids books you've written?

**Answer:** Yeah, yeah. Two novels and a picture book.

**Question:** What made you decide to go in this direction?

**Answer:** I have kids, so...

**Question:** You have kids?

**Answer:** Yeah two. Eight and three.

**Question:** Do you read your stuff to them?

**Answer:** Yeah, no, not my stuff, but I spend so much time reading to them, and reading kids books that I got inspired.

**Question:** What books inspired you?

**Answer:** Novel-wise, it would be this guy Rob Thomas who writes about teenagers in a really interesting way. Andrew and I forgot the guy's last name, wrote a book called, *Brindl*, really made me want to do it. Picture books. The classics. *The Snowy Day*. But the new ones are really funny and interesting, like *Duck Runs for President*, *You Give a Moose a Cookie*.

**Question:** And what about adult books?

**Answer:** I like everything.

**Question:** If it has arrived yet, what was the moment when you knew you had made it?

**Answer:** When I had something other than Indian Service medical care.

**Question:** Describe your writing process.

**Answer:** All the time. Wherever. Whenever. I stop when it's time to go home. Book and film critics generally have their say without response from writer or director. I'd like to hear what you have to say about the critics. Naaa.

**Question:** Do you have hopes or fears you'd be willing to talk about?

**Answer:** Hopes, that I continue to write good books. Fears? That I don't.

**Question:** What are you reading these days?

**Answer:** Lot of mysteries. Dennis Lehane. His book, *Mystic River*, was made into a movie. But I've really been reading his. He has about eight or nine of them.

**Question:** How do you feel about the state of the country/the war in Iraq?

**Answer:** I am distressed by the pessimism of the left and the right. Our country gets better and better with every generation. And I don't understand why people think this president is any worse or better than any other president. Our politicians have never measured the quality of our country.

two substituted talk about sports for telling each other, 'I love you.'

"My dad would leave us for weeks at a time on his binges," Alexie said. "And I would cry myself sick."

The story circled around to how his grandfather, who was killed in the second world war when his father was only six, "was a war hero, but we didn't know that." The family learned that the Defense Department had just never bothered to

present the awards to the family. "We were Indians," he said in explanation.

"So Oprah calls," he said, picking up the oft-interrupted narrative, and he went through the trip to Oprah's complete with the gastric surprise he brought to the show.

Oprah, it turned out, had brought on some generals who had not the nine medals Alexie thought his grandfather was owed, but twelve, making him even more of a hero.

In the process, he talked about how — regardless of his own "Horatio Alger on the reservation" story — "nobody's protected." He said that he paid more than \$170,000 in taxes last year, but still, his son, Joseph, "came out dead and green. I'm thinking, 'my wife cheated on me with a Martian.' I was so jealous."

The doctors were able to save his son, and he's doing fine today, but the notion that nobody — particu-

larly Alexie — is protected came up again and again. It came up in service to the story he wanted to tell about his father.

It went on to describe how his father chose to go off dialysis when he brought him the medals, how he had six good weeks, two bad ones and two more terrible ones before he died.

Alexie's mother was standing by a *Smoke Signals* poster on the door when his father died. His father looked at his wife and at the poster behind her and his last words, according to Alexie, were, "I should have married Irene Bedard (a *Smoke Signals* cast member whose likeness is on the poster).

Then, Alexie read his poem, "On the First Anniversary of My Father's Death," in which he compared birds flying into windows with the actions of his alcoholic dad. He seemed to be saying that the two just liked to do stupid things. He gave no indication that he realized that birds don't see the windows they fly into.

Though he acknowledged during the show that he was probably offending half of the audience, the end of the show brought everyone in the full house to their feet. During the sustained applause, this man of smiles stood alone — in the largest sense of the word — on the stage. His face appeared masked in sadness. He seemed to be oblivious to the adoring audience.

His father was gone and neither cleverness nor brilliance, neither anger nor understanding nor love would ever bring him back. ■



**A Crush On The Big Indian...** Sherman Alexie had some fun with Oregon State University Signer Samantha Hatfield (Siletz), a doctoral student. "How do you sign, 'I have a crush on the big Indian?'" Alexie asked her.