

## A Brief Chat With Sherman Alexie

by Jim Grinnell

I had hoped to interview Sherman Alexie in Madison, Wisconsin, this past summer, but the throng of people the popular performer and writer drew prevented that. The next best thing was a telephone interview, and while I'm reasonably competent with mechanical things, I have botched recordings of a couple of other interviews. In this case, when Sherman called I could not find my list of prepared questions. He laughed at this (he laughs a lot), but I was somewhat flustered. So much for grace under pressure. Judge the results for yourself.

**The Bloomsbury Review:** *I'm impressed with the large crowds that turn out to hear and see you. Is that commonplace?*

**Sherman Alexie:** We've drawn a thousand or more in many places and even had over 300 in Manhattan. Unfortunately it doesn't translate into big book sales. Some writers have much smaller gatherings but sell more books.

**TBR:** *People may be hungry for an unpretentious voice and the genuine article, both of which you provide. What do you think of American Indian wannabes?*

**SA:** Maybe there should be courses in "Colonial Lit." in which these people could be read. Of course there's a range—from the fairly innocuous to the real frauds. Maybe there should be a red version of "Survivor," set on a Dakota reservation, to determine who's the real thing. [Laughs]

**TBR:** *You once wrote an autobiographical sketch called "One Little Indian." Is that why this collection of nine stories is called Ten Little Indians?*

**SA:** [Laughs] You know, it's really funny that people have such a need for order. Everywhere I go, people ask why the title says ten little Indians and there are only nine stories. If anything, I did it to see what kind of reaction it would get.

**TBR:** *I really liked several of these new stories. Do you have a favorite among them?*

**SA:** Everywhere I go, and in almost all of the published reviews, people mention "What You Pawn I Will Redeem." That seems to be a favorite.

**TBR:** *My favorite is "What Ever Happened to Frank Snake Church?" And it seems to me that a photograph that appeared with the 1998 New York Times Magazine article, with you holding a basketball and standing on an outdoor court, would make a near-perfect illustration for this story. I wanted to ask you about that picture. First, it's unusual that you are not smiling. And there's a very salient gasoline can standing on the court. Is that gasoline can meant to be an ominous symbol of some kind?*

**SA:** [Laughs] Naw. We put it there because on the reservation we would use gasoline to burn the snow off the court in winter. That's all.

**TBR:** *Yet basketball is very important at several points in the book. Do you see it as a metaphor for something else, something more?*

**SA:** No, it's just a cheap game for poor people, one that requires only a ball and almost any kind of hoop. That's why it's popular with many poor people.

**TBR:** *The Corliss story ["The Search Engine"], which opens the book, and the Frank Snake Church story—at around 50 pages each—are approaching novella length and contain elements that might be expanded. Have you considered using either of them, perhaps in combination with bits from other stories in the collection, to develop a screenplay?*

**SA:** I am going to be working on a screenplay soon, but it will draw not only from these stories but also from work across the spectrum, new and old.

And so it went. I meant to ask him about the recurring statements some of his characters make about humor being used as a form of evasion and dishonesty, a pretty good question I think. But having felt like a sophomore symbol hunter after seeing the gasoline can as a possible threat, I'm glad I didn't ask him if his new, short haircut was in any way a result of the 9/11 fallout, or maybe it meant he no longer felt a need to look especially Indian. I'm guessing that he would have laughed and said that no, short hair is more comfortable and cooler during the summer. ■

REVIEWER: **Jim Grinnell** is a writer who lives in De Kalb, IL.