

## **Sherman Alexie, A Biography (from the author's official website)**

Sherman J. Alexie, Jr., was born in October 1966. A Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, he grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, WA, about 50 miles northwest of Spokane, WA.

Born hydrocephalic, which means with water on the brain, Alexie underwent a brain operation at the age of 6 months and was not expected to survive. When he did beat the odds, doctors predicted he would live with severe mental retardation. Though he showed no signs of this, he suffered severe side effects, such as seizures, throughout his childhood. In spite of all he had to overcome, Alexie learned to read by age three, and devoured novels, such as John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, by age five. All these things ostracized him from his peers, though, and he was often the brunt of other kids' jokes on the reservation.

As a teenager, after finding his mother's name written in a textbook assigned to him at the Wellpinit school, Alexie made a conscious decision to attend high school off the reservation in Reardan, WA, about 20 miles south of Wellpinit, where he knew he would get a better education. At Reardan High he was the only Indian, except for the school mascot. There he excelled academically and became a star player on the basketball team. This experience inspired his first young adult novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*.

In 1985 Alexie graduated Reardan High and went on to attend Gonzaga University in Spokane, WA, on scholarship. After two years at Gonzaga, he transferred to Washington State University (WSU) in Pullman, WA.

Alexie planned to be a doctor and enrolled in pre-med courses at WSU, but after fainting numerous times in human anatomy class realized he needed to change his career path. That change was fueled when he stumbled into a poetry workshop at WSU.

Encouraged by poetry teacher Alex Kuo, Alexie excelled at writing and realized he'd found his new path. Shortly after graduating WSU with a BA in American Studies, Alexie received the Washington State Arts Commission Poetry Fellowship in 1991 and the National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowship in 1992.

Not long after receiving his second fellowship, and just one year after he left WSU, his first two poetry collections, *The Business of Fancydancing* and *I Would Steal Horses*, were published.

Alexie had a problem with alcohol that began soon after he started college at Gonzaga, but after learning that Hanging Loose Press agreed to publish *The Business of Fancydancing*, he immediately gave up drinking at the age of 23 and has been sober ever since.

In his twenties he continued to write prolifically. His first collection of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, was published by Atlantic Monthly Press in 1993. For this story collection he received a PEN/Hemingway Award for Best First Book of Fiction, and was awarded a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writers' Award. In March 2005 Grove Atlantic Press reissued the collection with the addition of two new stories.

Alexie was named one of Granta's Best of Young American Novelists and won the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award and the Murray Morgan Prize for his first novel, *Reservation Blues*,

published in 1995 by Atlantic Monthly Press. His second novel, *Indian Killer*, published in 1996, also by Atlantic Monthly Press, was named one of *People's* Best of Pages and a *New York Times* Notable Book. This book was published in paperback by Warner Books in 1998.

In the past, Alexie has done readings and stand-up comedy performances with musician Jim Boyd, a Colville Indian. Alexie and Boyd collaborated to record the album *Reservation Blues*, which contains the songs from the book of the same name. One of the *Reservation Blues* songs, "Small World" [WAV], also appeared on *Talking Rain: Spoken Word & Music from the Pacific Northwest* and *Honor: A Benefit for the Honor the Earth Campaign*. In 1996 Boyd and Alexie opened for the Indigo Girls at a concert to benefit the Honor the Earth Campaign.

In 1997 Alexie embarked on another artistic collaboration. Chris Eyre, a Cheyenne/Arapaho Indian, discovered Alexie's writing while doing graduate work at New York University's film school. Through a mutual friend, they agreed to collaborate on a film project inspired by Alexie's work.

The basis for the screenplay was "This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," a short story from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Shadow Catcher Entertainment produced the film. Released as *Smoke Signals* at the Sundance Film Festival in January 1998, the movie won two awards: the Audience Award and the Filmmakers Trophy.

After success at Sundance, *Smoke Signals* found a distributor, Miramax Films, and was released in New York and Los Angeles on June 26 and across the country on July 3, 1998. In 1999 the film received a Christopher Award, an award presented to the creators of artistic works "which affirm the highest values of the human spirit." Alexie was also nominated for the Independent Feature Project/West (now known as Film Independent) 1999 Independent Spirit Award for Best First Screenplay.

In 2002 Alexie made his directorial debut with *The Business of Fancydancing*. Alexie wrote the screenplay based loosely on his first poetry collection. The film was produced and distributed independently, and won numerous film festival awards.

In 1998, in the midst of releasing *Smoke Signals*, Alexie competed in and won his first World Heavyweight Poetry Bout competition in June 1998, organized by the World Poetry Bout Association (WPBA) in Taos, New Mexico. He went up against then world champion Jimmy Santiago Baca. Over the next three years he went on to win the title, becoming the first and only poet to hold the title for four consecutive years. The WPBA closed its doors in early 2005.

Known for his exceptional humor and performance ability, Alexie made his stand-up debut at the Foolproof Northwest Comedy Festival in Seattle, WA, in April 1999, and was the featured performer at the Vancouver International Comedy Festival's opening night gala in July 1999. He continues to pursue his work in comedy.

In 1998, Alexie participated with seven others in the PBS Lehrer News Hour Dialogue on Race with President Clinton. The discussion was moderated by Jim Lehrer and originally aired on PBS on July 9, 1998. Alexie has also been featured on *Politically Incorrect*; *60 Minutes II*; *NOW* with Bill Moyers, for which he wrote a special segment on insomnia and his writing process called "Up All Night;" and on *The Colbert Report* in October 2008 and December 2009.

In February 2003, Alexie participated in the Museum of Tolerance project, "Finding Our Families, Finding Ourselves," an exhibit showcasing the diversity within the personal histories of several noted Americans, and celebrating the shared experiences common to being part of an American family, encouraging visitors to seek out their own histories, mentors and heroes. This project was featured on The Oprah Winfrey Show, "Our Big American Family," which originally aired in January 2003, on which Alexie was a guest.

Alexie, also a thought-provoking public speaker, was the commencement speaker for the University of Washington's 2003 commencement ceremony. In 2004, 2006 and 2008 he was an Artist in Residence at the university where he taught courses in American Ethnic Studies.

He was the guest editor for the Winter 2000-01 issue of *Ploughshares*, a prestigious literary journal, and was a 1999 O. Henry Award Prize juror.

He has been a member of a number of Independent Spirit Awards Nominating Committees, and has served as a creative adviser to the Sundance Institute Writers Fellowship Program and the Film Independent Screenwriters Lab.

Highlights of his most recent honors include the 2010 PEN / Faulkner Award for Fiction for *War Dances*, a collection of stories and poems, was released by Grove Press in October 2009; the 2009 Odyssey Award for *The Absolutely True Diary* audio book, produced by Recorded Books, LLC; the 2009 Mason Award; a 2008 Scanduzzi Children's Book Award for middle grades and young adults; a 2008 Stranger Genius Award; and the 2007 National Book Award in Young People's Literature for his young adult novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*.

His most recent poetry collection, *Face*, was published by Hanging Loose Press in March 2009 and was Small Press Distribution's best selling poetry book of 2009. Four of his books of poetry were among the top five of Small Press Distribution's best selling poetry books for 2000-2009.

Other awards and honors include the 2007 Western Literature Association's Distinguished Achievement Award and the 2003 Regents' Distinguished Alumnus Award, Washington State University's highest honor for alumni. His work was selected for inclusion in *The Best American Short Stories 2004*, edited by Lorrie Moore, and Pushcart Prize XXIX of the Small Presses. His short story "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" was selected by juror Ann Patchett as her favorite story for *The O. Henry Prize Stories 2005*.

Please see the books and movies pages for more details about Alexie's complete works, and please see the awards page for a complete list of his honors.

Alexie lives in Seattle, WA, with his wife and two sons.

<http://www.fallsapart.com/biography.html> Last updated: 07.10

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