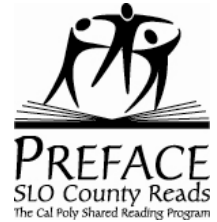




PREFACE SLO County Reads: The Cal Poly Shared Reading Program



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY: SHERMAN ALEXIE

Born in 1966 with hydrocephalus, an accumulation of fluid in the cranium, Sherman J. Alexie Jr. underwent brain surgery 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 disability. Though he showed no signs of brain damage, he did suffer from 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. His differences made him the brunt of pranks on the reservation on which he grew up with approximately 1,100 other Spokane tribal members.

As a teenager, Alexie made a conscious decision to attend high school off the reservation 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*, for which he won the 2007 National Book Award in Young People's Literature.

After graduating high school in 1985 Alexie attended Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, on scholarship. After two years at Gonzaga, he transferred to Washington State University (WSU). He planned to be a doctor and enrolled in pre-med courses, but after fainting numerous times in human anatomy class realized he needed to change his career path. A new direction opened up when he stumbled into a poetry workshop at WSU.

Encouraged by his poetry teacher, Alexie excelled at writing and realized he'd found his new path. Shortly after graduating with a BA in American Studies, Alexie received the Washington State Arts Commission Poetry Fellowship in 1991. Not long after receiving a second fellowship in 1992, and just one year after he left WSU, his first two poetry collections, *The Business of Fancydancing* and *I Would Steal Horses*, were published.

In his twenties he continued to write prolifically. His first collection of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, earned him a PEN/Hemingway Award for Best First Book of Fiction. He also received numerous awards for his first two novels, *Reservation Blues* and *Indian Killer*, published in 1995 and 1996 respectively.

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*. Released as *Smoke Signals* at the Sundance Film Festival in January 1998, the movie won two awards: the Audience Award and the Filmmakers Trophy.

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 also won numerous film festival awards.

Alexie, who is 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.

Other awards and honors include the 2003 Regents' Distinguished Alumnus Award, Washington State University's highest honor for alumni; inclusion in *The Best American Short Stories 2004*; favorite story in *The O. Henry Prize Stories 2005* for "What You Pawn I Will Redeem"; and a Western Literature Association's Distinguished Achievement Award in 2007. Most recently, Alexie was honored with the 2009 Odyssey Award for *The Absolutely True Diary* audio book.

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