Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock Study Guide

Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock by Sherman Alexie

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock" was first published in Sherman Alexie's 1993 short story collection, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven.* Although Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, had previously published three books, this collection gave him much greater exposure and was a critical and popular success. In 1998, when Alexie adapted part of the collection into a movie entitled *Smoke Signals,* the book—and Alexie—received even more exposure. Alexie is one of many late twentieth-century Native-American authors who have found acceptance with the general public in recent years. Many feel this literary renaissance was sparked by N. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1968 novel, *House Made of Dawn,* which details the alienation of the modern Native American in American society.

Like many of Alexie's works, the stories in this collection all take place on or around the Spokane Indian Reservation in Washington State, where Alexie grew up, and detail the many hardships that Native Americans face on reservations. In addition, many of the stories draw upon characters created in Alexie's earlier works. In "Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock," one of these characters, Victor, recalls his father's separation from the family through several forms of escape. The story addresses the turbulent nature of reservation relationships, the widespread use of alcohol among Native Americans, and the power of music. Most importantly, the story underscores the struggle to survive against the loss of cultural identity. The story can be found in the paperback version of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven,* which was published by HarperPerennial in 1994.

Author Biography

Alexie was born on October 7, 1966, in Spokane, Washington. A Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, Alexie grew up in Wellpinit, Washington, on the Spokane Indian Reservation. At birth, Alexie was diagnosed with hydrocephalus—an abnormal swelling of the brain and head due to excess fluid—and he underwent brain surgery at six months. The hydrocephalus gave Alexie an enlarged skull, which prompted merciless teasing by other children on the reservation. As a result, Alexie spent most of his time alone, reading in the Wellpinit School Library.

Alexie's father, an alcoholic, was frequently absent from home, while Alexie's mother worked as a clerk at the Wellpinit Trading Post and sewed quilts to support Alexie and his five siblings. Alexie transferred to a mostly white high school in Rearden—thirty miles off the reservation—to get the credits he needed to attend college. Alexie was accepted by the high school community and became captain of the basketball team and class president. He graduated with honors in 1985 and was awarded a scholarship to Gonzaga University in Spokane. However, the pressure to fit in led him to abuse alcohol for the first time in his life. In 1987, he dropped out and moved to Seattle, where he worked busing tables. The same year, he gave up drinking and enrolled at Washington State University, where he took a poetry class taught by Alex Kuo. After reading Alexie's first poem, Kuo told Alexie that he should be a writer. Inspired, Alexie produced several poems and short stories by the time he graduated in 1991. In 1992, he published his first two books, a poetry collection entitled I Would Steal Horses and a poetry and short fiction collection entitled *The Business of Fancydancing.* The latter was named the 1992 Notable Book of the Year by the *New York Times Book Review.*

In 1993, Alexie proved to be even more prolific, publishing three books: a poetry collection entitled *First Indian on the Moon;* a poetry collection entitled *Old Shirts & New Skins;* and a collection of short stories entitled *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven.* The last title, which includes the story "Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock," attracted the attention of both critics and readers. The book received even greater exposure when Alexie used part of it as the basis for his screenplay for the film *Smoke Signals* (1998). In 1995, Alexie published his first novel, *Reservation Blues,* which won the American Book Award the following year. Alexie's recent works include a short-story collection entitled *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000) and a collection of poetry and short stories entitled *One Stick Song* (2000). In addition to his published writing, Alexie is also noted for his performances, particularly his poetry readings. In June 2001, Alexie became the first four-time winner of the World Heavyweight Championship Poetry Bout, an annual challenge held in Taos, New Mexico. Alexie still lives and works in Wellpinit.

Plot Summary

"Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock" begins with the narrator, Victor, remembering his father. Victor's father quickly becomes the focal point of the story, as Victor explains how his father went to prison after beating up a National Guard private at a peace demonstration. The event was heavily documented, since Victor's father was a Native American. Victor recalls how, even though somebody new was killed every day in prison, his father was able to escape any serious confrontations. After he was released, Victor's father hitchhiked to Woodstock, where he saw Jimi Hendrix play "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Victor notes that, twenty years later, his father had played his Jimi Hendrix tape with the live song on it over and over again. He also notes the ritual that he and his father had followed when playing the tape. When Victor would hear his father come in late at night from drinking, Victor would start the tape. His father would listen for a little while, then pass out at the kitchen table, while Victor would fall asleep under the table by his father's feet. Victor notes that his father felt guilty about this ritual and so in the mornings would try to make it up to Victor by telling him stories. Sometimes these stories centered on Victor's mother, whom his father remembers as very beautiful. In fact, Victor notes that as the years went by and his parents' relationship deteriorated, Victor's father remembered his wife as increasingly more beautiful.

Victor notes how his parents had a violent relationship, which was often based on nights of heavy drinking and making love. Victor talks more about his relationship with his father, citing one memory in particular, a drive home from a basketball game in blizzard-like conditions. Jimi Hendrix's version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" comes on the radio, inspiring Victor to talk to his father— something they did not often do. After the song is over, Victor tells his father that he is sad that his generation has not had a real war to fight. His father tells him that he is lucky and that there is only war and peace in life, with nothing in between.

On another occasion, Victor's father tells him about the first time that he danced with Victor's mother, a conversation that leads his father into talking about how kids in Victor's generation know nothing about romance or music. Victor remembers how he used to stay awake at night listening to his parents making love, a concept that is alien to his white friends. Victor thinks that this positive experience makes up for the negative experience of watching his parents fight all the time. Victor notes that sometimes he would listen to his parents making love while dreaming about his father at Woodstock and says that he has seen footage of the music festival. However, Victor also admits that he still does not know what it was like for his father.

Victor recalls how his father drove them to Seattle a few years back to visit Jimi Hendrix's grave. While his father idolizes Hendrix, his mother is derogatory towards Hendrix's drug-related death. This disagreement turns into a fight, and Victor notes that, in contemporary Native-American marriages, fights get more destructive as the

relationship falls apart. With the increasing number of fights, Victor's father buys a motorcycle as a means of escape from his life. While the bike helps his father cut down on his drinking, it also closes him off even more from his family. One night, Victor's father wrecks the bike and almost dies in the accident. Victor's mother supports her husband while he gets well, but after that she returns to her old life as traditional Native-American dancer.

Victor talks about his father's ability to alter his memories and says that this is something he has learned from his father. Victor remembers how his father moved away and how his mother raised him after that. Victor talks to his mother, asking her why his father left, and she says that Victor's father would rather be alone than hang around other people. After he leaves, Victor catches his mother looking through old photographs and realizes that she misses his father but that she does not want him back. Victor starts listening to blues music and thinks that he can identify with how his father felt at Woodstock.

One night, Victor imagines his father pulling up on his motorcycle and asking Victor if he wants to go for a ride. Victor realizes that it is not real but goes along with the illusion, anyway. He goes outside to wait for his father, and when his mother comes outside to fetch him from the cold night, he says that he knows his father is coming back. Victor's mother wraps him in a blanket and goes back to sleep. Victor stays up all night waiting and imagining, then finally goes back inside to have breakfast with his mother.

Characters

Victor

Victor is the narrator, who talks about the events that lead to his father leaving him and his mother. Victor has grown up in a household defined by sex and violence. When he was young, his father went to prison for two years for beating up a National Guard private at a peace demonstration. When his father returns, Victor watches his parents fight constantly, which is a negative experience, although it is canceled out in his mind by the positive experience of listening to his parents make love. Victor has difficulty communicating with his father, who has a hard time opening up. However, Jimi Hendrix's version of "The Star-Spangled Banner," as well as other music, becomes a medium through which Victor is able to talk to his father. In one conversation with his father, Victor says that he wishes that his generation had a war to fight. His father says he is lucky that they are in peacetime, especially since Native Americans should not be fighting for a country that has been killing them from its very beginning.

Victor's father often talks about his past relationship with Victor's mother, which he remembers fondly. However, Victor's mother tells her son a different story. Victor realizes that his father remembers the past as he would have liked it to be, not as it was, and that his father has passed this belief in false memories and the imaginary to Victor. When Victor's father ultimately leaves, Victor has trouble remembering the exact way that it happened. After his father leaves, Victor listens to a lot of music, especially the blues. One night, when Victor is missing his father the most, he imagines his father's motorcycle pulling up to their house to take him for a ride. Although he knows it is not real, Victor goes along with the illusion and waits on the porch all night for his father. In the morning, he goes inside and shares a breakfast with his mother.

Victor's Father

Victor's father lives his life in the past, which eventually drives him away from Victor and his mother. Victor's father has lived a hard life. When he was young, he attended a peace demonstration, where he ended up beating a National Guard private. This action earned him two years in prison, where he was constantly under the threat of being killed or molested. After getting out of prison, Victor's father hitchhiked to Woodstock to see Jimi Hendrix play "The Star-Spangled Banner." Based upon this experience, Jimi Hendrix becomes the most important person in his life. After his many nights of drinking, Victor's father comes home to listen to Hendrix until he passes out. Music is one of the few ways that Victor's father is able to open up to Victor, and when he does, he tells Victor that kids his age do not understand romance or music. However, Victor's mother lets Victor know that his father is not good at either romance or music.

The relationship between Victor's parents is volatile—based mainly on drunken parties and lovemaking—although Victor's father remembers it as being better in the past. In

fact, Victor notes that his father has the ability to remember things as they should have been, not as they really were. Because of this, as the relationship with his wife deteriorates, Victor's father remembers her as being increasingly more beautiful in the past. This inability to let go of false memories, as well as his inability to open up to his family, eventually pushes Victor's father away from the family. When Victor's father buys a motorcycle, this situation gets even worse, because he now has a means of literally escaping his home life. He rides his motorcycle until he crashes it, and after he recovers, he leaves Victor and his mother. He travels to various locations in the West and sends frequent postcards to Victor, although the frequency lessens with time.

Victor's Mother

Victor's mother used to be a traditional Native-American dancer. She met her husband at a party where they were the only two Native Americans. Although Victor's father has fond memories of their time together, his mother tells Victor that his father was always half crazy. She says that their best times were when he fell into a drunken sleep while they were making love. Victor's parents have little in common beyond their drunken parties and lovemaking. They fight constantly, which eventually drives them apart. When Victor's father ultimately leaves them, Victor and his mother try to go on with their lives, but they both miss Victor's father and look through old pictures of him. When Victor goes on the porch one cold night to wait for his father to come back, Victor's mother covers Victor in a blanket and leaves him to his thoughts. In the morning, Victor's mother shares a breakfast with her son.

Themes

War

War The story describes both physical and cultural wars. Victor references actual wars, such as Vietnam, when he remembers how his father beat a guard at a peace demonstration. In the photograph of the event, Victor notes his father's warlike appearance, saying, "my father is dressed in bellbottoms and flowered shirt, his hair in braids, with red peace symbols splashed across his face like war paint." Later, when Victor tells his father that "my generation of Indian boys ain't ever had no real war to fight," Victor's father says that he is "lucky" that there are no wars going on and that there is only "war and peace with nothing in between." Victor's father also questions Victor's desire to fight for a country that has "been trying to kill Indians since the very beginning." Victor notes that cultural wars take place off the reservation, too, such as when his father goes to prison for beating the guard. "Although his prison sentence effectively kept him out of the war, my father went through a different kind of war behind bars." In prison, Victor's father, like everybody else, lives under the constant threat of being killed by someone from a different culture. As he notes to Victor: "We'd hear about somebody getting it in the shower or wherever and the word would go down the line. Just one word. Just the color of his skin."

Reservation Relationship

In the story, Victor describes what relationships are like on a reservation. One of the biggest social problems on reservations is alcoholism, and both of Victor's parents are heavy drinkers. Says Victor, "My mother and father would get drunk and leave parties abruptly to go home and make love." Alcohol and sex form the foundation of their marriage, which is destructive and unstable. Says Victor, "their love was passionate, unpredictable, and selfish." Victor also compares modern Native-American marriages on reservations to traditional Native-American marriages. "A hundred years ago, an Indian marriage was broken easily. The woman or man just packed up all their possessions and left the tipi." However, since early settlers first started intruding on Native-American lands, Native Americans have become focused on cultural and physical survival. As a result, when a modern Native-American marriage deteriorates, "it's even more destructive and painful than usual," as Victor notes. This is because modern Indians tend to "fight their way to the end, holding onto the last good thing, because our whole lives have to do with survival."

The Power of Music

Music serves many purposes in the story. For Victor's father, music becomes an escape from his daily reality, especially when it is coupled with alcohol. For example, Victor notes how his father listens to his tape of Jimi Hendrix's "The Star-Spangled Banner"

repeatedly while drinking. Says Victor, "He'd sit by the stereo with a cooler of beer beside him and cry, laugh, call me over and hold me tight in his arms." Later in the story, Victor's father buys a motorcycle and attaches "an old cassette player to the gas tank so he could listen to music." The motorcycle and music are an effective combination for escaping his situation, so much so that Victor's father "stopped drinking as much" and "didn't do much of anything except ride that bike and listen to music." Music also becomes a means of communication between Victor and his father, who has a hard time opening up. Says Victor, "Music turned my father into a reservation philosopher. Music had powerful medicine."

In particular, Jimi Hendrix's version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" becomes a catalyst for getting Victor and his father to talk about Victor's mother, war, and what it means to be a Native American. Says Victor, "Those were the kinds of conversations that Jimi Hendrix forced us to have. I guess every song has a special meaning for someone somewhere." Music also becomes a passion for Victor, who sees it both as a means of gaining insight into life and as a way of understanding his father. At one point, Victor notes why he wanted to play the guitar. Says Victor, "I just wanted to touch the strings, to hold the guitar tight against my body, invent a chord, and come closer to what Jimi knew, to what my father knew." Even after Victor's father has left the family, music is a way for Victor to connect with him. Victor listens to the blues and thinks: "That must have been how my father felt when he heard Jimi Hendrix. When he stood there in the rain at Woodstock."

Style

Point of View

The story is told from the first person point of view, a fact established by the use of the word "my" in the first sentence of the story: "During the sixties, my father was the perfect hippie, since all the hippies were trying to be Indians." In first person works, the story is narrated by one of the characters, who gives the reader his or her view of the events in the work. first person narratives like this one are very personal. Since Victor talks to readers directly—instead of having his thoughts and feelings related to the reader through an outside, third person narrator—readers feel closer to Victor.

Setting

As Victor remembers his father's life and experiences, the setting changes several times. These setting changes are not arbitrary. Each time, the setting is important to the narrative. When the story begins, Victor is remembering his father's arrest at a Vietnam peace demonstration. His experiences in Walla Walla State Penitentiary, the next setting that Victor describes, are important because they highlight the war theme of the story. Also, because he survives his prison experience, Victor's father is inspired to go to the Woodstock Festival. Says Victor, he "got out of prison just in time to hitchhike to Woodstock to watch Jimi Hendrix play 'The Star-Spangled Banner." This experience instills a deep love of Hendrix and his song in Victor's father, and becomes the controlling force in his life—and by extension, in Victor's life.

Victor remembers one of the rituals in their relationship, which involved playing Hendrix's version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" for his father when he came home from a night of drinking. Says Victor, "My father would weep, attempt to hum along with Jimi, and then pass out with his head on the kitchen table." Meanwhile, Victor "would fall asleep under the table" and stay with his father until the morning. Even the reservation setting where Victor grows up plays an important role in the story. Victor's father feels the need to escape his reservation life—and his family—and tries to do so through music and alcohol. In fact, Victor directly associates alcohol problems with reservation life at one point, when he is describing what it was like the night he thought his father might come back for him. Says Victor, "It was so quiet, a reservation kind of quiet, where you can hear somebody drinking whiskey on the rocks three miles away."

Personification

In the story, Jimi Hendrix's music becomes a living force in the lives of Victor and his father. In this way, Alexie uses personification, a literary technique by which a non-human object or idea—in this case Hendrix's recorded music—is described as having human qualities. Says Victor, "Jimi Hendrix and my father became drinking buddies. Jimi Hendrix waited for my father to come home after a long night of drinking." This is

technically impossible, since music is not alive and so does not have human consciousness—a necessary prerequisite to being able to "wait" for anything. On another occasion, Hendrix's music helps ensure that Victor and his father get home safely in near-blizzard conditions. Victor and his father are driving on treacherous roads, when suddenly Hendrix's version of "The Star-Spangled Banner," the favorite song of Victor's father, comes on the radio. Says Victor, "My father smiled, turned the volume up, and we rode down the highway while Jimi led the way like a snowplow."

Victor notes that his father idolizes Hendrix so much that, at one point, he "packed up the family and the three of us drove to Seattle to visit Jimi Hendrix's grave." This unnatural obsession with Hendrix helps to further isolate Victor's father from his family, which eventually leads to the divorce between Victor's parents. Victor asks his mother, "Was it because of Jimi Hendrix?" Victor's mother notes that Hendrix did play a part in the divorce: "This might be the only marriage broken up by a dead guitar player."

Historical Context

The Persian Gulf War

The Persian Gulf War, also known simply as the Gulf War, began on August 2, 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait—presumably in an attempt to steal the small country's large oil supply. Although the United Nations Security Council imposed economic sanctions on Iraq, Saddam Hussein, Iraq's leader, continued to increase his military forces in Kuwait. On August 6, the United States and its allies began to occupy nearby Saudi Arabia to prevent an attack on the Saudi oil supply. This combined military buildup was known as Operation Desert Shield. On November 29, the United Nations Security Council gave Hussein a deadline of January 15, 1991, to peacefully withdraw his forces. At the same time, the Security Council authorized the use of force by the United States and its allies if Hussein did not comply. Hussein ignored the deadline, and on January 18, Operation Desert Storm was launched. Under the leadership of United States General Norman Schwarzkopf, the United States and its allies began a sustained aerial assault on Iraq and effectively destroyed Iraq's military forces; government and military installations; transportation and communication networks; and oil refineries. On February 24, the allies launched Operation Desert Sabre, a ground assault from Saudi Arabia into Kuwait and southern Iraq that faced relatively little resistance. On February 28, President George Bush called a cease-fire.

Native Americans in the Early 1990s

The 1990 United States census revealed that roughly two million Native Americans were living in the country, an increase of more than 40 percent since 1980. This increase made Native Americans one of the fastest-growing ethnic groups, even though they were still less than 1 percent of the United States population. More than 60 percent of Native Americans lived in urban areas such as Los Angeles, although most were in the habit of returning to reservations for annual visits. The census also revealed some disturbing facts about the social problems that many Native Americans continued to face, including lack of education, poverty, and alcoholism. Of the more than one million Native Americans who were twenty-five years or older, roughly 65 percent had finished high school, while less than 10 percent had completed a bachelor's degree or higher level of education. In addition, Native Americans were the poorest population group in the United States. More than 27 percent of Native-American families were living below the poverty level. The median household income for all Native Americans was less than twenty thousand dollars per year, while on reservations, it was even lower—thirteen thousand dollars per year. However, one of the biggest social problems, especially on reservations, was alcoholism. Native-American alcoholism rates were three times as high as those in the rest of the United States, and occurrences of fetal alcohol syndrome births were also high.

Native-American Activism

Two hot issues in Native-American activism in the early 1990s were the protection of burial lands and artifacts and the preservation of religious freedom. In the 1980s, federal agencies such as museums retained Native-American human remains and sacred artifacts, when many spiritual leaders preferred that these items be laid to rest in the earth. Concerned Native-American organizations lobbied heavily to have these burial items returned to them. In 1990, these groups scored a victory when Congress passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). The act required all universities, museums, and other agencies that received federal funds to inventory any Native-American bones, human remains, and sacred artifacts that they held. In addition, these agencies were required to notify the tribal governments that they held these artifacts and to return any or all of these items to the respective tribal governments upon request.

The passing of this act signaled a victory for Native Americans on a culturally important issue. However, in the area of religious freedom, Native Americans were dealt two significant setbacks by the United States Supreme Court in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1978, Congress had passed the American Indian Freedom of Religion Act, which stated that the federal government would work to protect Native Americans' right to practice their traditional, tribal religions. This included giving Native Americans access to sacred sites on federal lands. However, in 1988, in *Lyng v. Northwest Indian Cemetery Protective Association,* the Supreme Court ruled that the National Forest Service could build a road that passed through sacred Native-American sites on federal lands.

In addition, in 1990s *Employment Division, Department of Human Resources of Oregon v. Smith,* the Supreme Court ruled that individual states could outlaw religious practices of the Native American Church. This shocked many Native Americans, since they had thought these practices were federally protected by the 1978 American Indian Freedom of Religion Act as well as by the First Amendment. The issue at stake was the use of peyote, a stimulant drug. Two Native-American drug counselors had been fired for using the drug in a legally sanctioned Native American Church ritual and had been denied unemployment compensation by the state of Oregon since the use of peyote violated state law.

Critical Overview

When *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* was published by the Atlantic Monthly Press in 1993, it was the first of Alexie's books to be published by a major press. The book has been received well by audiences, and most critics give it high marks, too. Some critics note that the book shares themes that are common in Alexie's first three books. Says Susan B. Brill, in her 1997 entry on Alexie in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography:* "Survival is perhaps the omnipresent theme of these four books." On a similar note, in her Winter 2000/2001 *Ploughshares* article, Lynn Cline notes that Alexie's work "carries the weight of five centuries of colonization, retelling the American Indian struggle to survive, painting a clear, compelling, and often painful portrait of modern Indian life."

Specific critical discussion on *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* is often marked by a definition of what the book actually is. Many label the book a collection of short stories, but critics like Alan R. Velie believe that it is not so easily classified. Says Velie, in his 1994 review of the book for *World Literature Today,* it is "somewhere between a novel and a collection of short stories." Regardless of how people classify it, the book has greatly increased Alexie's esteem in many critics' eyes. Velie praises Alexie, saying that the book "establishes him not only as one of the best of the Indian writers but as one of the most promising of the new generation of American writers."

A reviewer for *Kirkus Reviews* notes in 1993 that, in the book, "The history of defeat is everpresent; every attempt to hold onto cultural tradition aches with poignancy." Velie is one of many reviewers who notes the characters' feelings of "despair, guilt, and helplessness," a factor of life on the reservation, where people often "give up on life and lapse into unemployment and alcoholism." Several critics note that Alexie employs characters that he created in his earlier works. However, in her 1994 review of the book for *Western American Literature,* Andrea-Bess Baxter says that, although Alexie is covering old ground, "this work is more personal, autobiographical at times." Since *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* was one of five books that Alexie published within two years, it is not surprising that some of the books share common themes and characters. However, not all critics appreciate this. In fact, one critic, Reynolds Price, thinks that Alexie's rapid output is affecting his quality. Price, in his 1993 review of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven for the New York Times Book Review,* notes: "There is very little plot in any of them—plot in the sense of consecutive action with emotional outcome." Price asks: "Has Sherman Alexie moved too fast for his present strength?"

Very few critics have singled out "Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock." However, of those who have commented specifically on the story, the reviews have been positive. In his 1993 review of the book for the *Review of Contemporary Fiction,* Brian Schneider praises Alexie's narrative voice in the story, saying that it "resonates . . . with a passion that sees the irony in the flower power movement's co-opting of mostly

American Indian values." Finally, Leslie Marmon Silko, an acclaimed Native-American author, notes in a 1995 *Nation* article that the story is her "favorite" in the collection.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses Alexie's use of point of view to underscore the message of cultural struggle in "Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock."

In her article about Alexie for *Ploughshares,* Lynn Cline notes: "His work carries the weight of five centuries of colonization, retelling the American Indian struggle to survive, painting a clear, compelling, and often painful portrait of modern Indian life." As a modern Native-American child, Victor, the narrator, feels the effects of this colonization, too. Like most children, Victor relies on the examples set by his parents to provide him with the cultural instruction he needs to survive in the world. Unfortunately, his parents represent two extremes, making it difficult for him to form any solid beliefs. In fact, at one point when discussing his parents' genetic contributions to his makeup, he says he "was born a goofy reservation mixed drink." Although this specific example is referring to the alcoholic nature of his parents, it also serves to underscore Victor's mixed cultural education. While Victor is exposed to Native-American traditions through his mother, his father abandons tradition in favor of addictive American influences.

When Victor's mother is mentioned in the story, there is often a reference to her traditional Native-American background. Victor's father recognizes the traditional qualities of his wife, and often tells stories about her to his son. On one occasion, his father remembers the first time he met her. "I thought she was so beautiful. I figured she was the kind of woman who could make buffalo walk on up to her and give up their lives." In addition to associating Victor's mother with a traditional buffalo hunt, Victor's father also notes her former status as a Native-American dancer. Says Victor's father, "I remember your mother when she was the best traditional dancer in the world." In fact, when Victor's father is in the hospital, his mother sings "Indian tunes under her breath, in time with the hum of the machines hooked into my father." Victor's mother is most happy when she is involved with Native-American traditions, such as her dancing. As soon as her husband does not need her to stay with him in the hospital, "she went back to the life she had created. She traveled to powwows, started to dance again."

When he is a young man, Victor's father also tries to maintain his Native-American identity and values, by demonstrating at a Vietnam antiwar event. However, since he looks like a hippie and "all the hippies were trying to be Indians," his attempts at asserting his Native-American identity are thwarted. As Victor notes, "Because of that, how could anyone recognize that my father was trying to make a social statement?" In his review of the short-story collection for the *Review of Contemporary Fiction,* Brian Schneider cites this event as an example of the power of "Alexie's narrative voice," which "sees the irony in the flower power movement's co-opting of mostly American Indian values." When Victor's father beats up a National Guard private, he is sent to prison for two years. When he gets out, he goes to Woodstock, where he really begins to be assimilated into the American culture.

While his father is at Woodstock, Victor notes that: "My mother was at home with me, both of us waiting for my father to find his way back home to the reservation." However, once he has gone to prison, Victor's father has found his way *off* the reservation—at least in a figurative sense—for the rest of his life. From the time he leaves prison, he begins trying to escape his reality through American influences, the first of which is the trip to Woodstock to hear distinctly American rock music. In fact, his choice of Hendrix's "The Star-Spangled Banner" is symbolic. "The Star-Spangled Banner" is America's national anthem, and represents the solidarity of the country. When people sing the anthem, it is generally to express their pride and support for their country and government. As a young man, Victor's father is rebellious, and lashes out against icons of the government, such as the National Guard private. His prison experience changes his tune, literally, and he soon starts to be assimilated into many aspects of American culture, starting with his endless replaying of Hendrix's "The Star-Spangled Banner."

He also drinks large quantities of alcohol, which is another effect of assimilation. As Fred Beauvais notes in a 1998 article for *Alcohol Health & Research* World, Native Americans did not have access to strong alcohol prior to European colonization. Says Beauvais: "The distillation of more potent and thus more abusable forms of alcohol was unknown." Besides providing Native Americans with access to alcohol, Beauvais notes that colonists also set a bad example. Says Beauvais: "Extreme intoxication was common among the colonists and provided a powerful model for the social use of alcohol among the inexperienced Indian populations." Like his music, Victor's father uses alcohol as a form of escape from his life. On a typical night, he will "come home after a long night of drinking" to listen to Hendrix until he passes out in a drunken sleep.

By modeling alcoholism as a way of life, Victor's father is increasing the chance that Victor will become one of the many Native Americans who learn this addictive behavior from their parents. However, when he is sober, Victor's father becomes more responsible, and tries to save his son from harm by educating him politically. For example, during one conversation, Victor's father talks about the commercial quality of the Persian Gulf War, which he says only benefited the rich. Says Victor's father: "Should have called it Dessert Storm because it just made the fat cats get fatter." Victor's father also speaks out about the historical mistreatment of Native Americans by the United States. He discourages Victor's youthful desire to fight a war by asking him: "why the hell would you want to fight a war for this country? It's been trying to kill Indians since the very beginning."

However, despite these occasional discussions in which Victor's father rebels against the United States, for the most part he has agreed to his assimilation. He tells Victor that Native-American children have been hearing drums so long that "you think that's all you need. Hell, son, even an Indian needs a piano or guitar or saxophone now and again." The acceptance of all of these American instruments is a further sign that Victor's father is no longer fighting hard to maintain his cultural identity as a Native American. Victor notes as much when he remarks that, although his father "was the drummer" in his high school band, "I guess he'd burned out on those. Now, he was like the universal defender of the guitar." As the reviewer for *Kirkus Reviews* notes of the

short-story collection: "The history of defeat is ever-present; every attempt to hold onto cultural tradition aches with poignancy."

Victor's father's dependence on music, alcohol, and other American influences eventually separates him from his wife and son. In addition, when his marriage starts to fall apart, Victor's father does not follow tradition. As Victor notes, "A hundred years ago, an Indian marriage was broken easily. The woman or man just packed up all their possessions and left the tipi." However, times have changed. When modern Native-American relationships start to deteriorate, Victor notes that "Indians fight their way to the end, holding onto the last good thing, because our whole lives have to do with survival." At a certain point, the fighting gets so bad that Victor's father buys a motorcycle, and uses it to totally get away from the situation. Says Victor: "With that bike, he learned something new about running away. He stopped talking as much, stopped drinking as much. He didn't do much of anything except ride that bike and listen to music."

In addition to escaping his life through music, alcohol, or riding his motorcycle, Victor's father has also gained the ability to change his negative memories. As Victor puts it: "If you don't like the things you remember, then all you have to do is change the memories." For example, as the relationship between Victor's parents falls apart, Victor's father remembers his mother as increasingly more beautiful. Says Victor, "By the time the divorce was final, my mother was quite possibly the most beautiful woman who ever lived." Victor's mother usually gives her son a different story than what he hears from his father. At one point, Victor's father tells him that Victor's generation does not know anything about music or romance. However, when Victor's mother describes her husband's failed attempts at playing the guitar, she demonstrates that he is also bad at romance. Says Victor's mother, "His eyes got all squeezed up and his face turned all red. He kind of looked that way when he kissed me, too." Victor notes that his father's example has taught him how to change his own memories. This becomes evident when Victor discusses the separation from his father. He describes the event from three different points of view: his father's memory, his own memory, and his mother's memory. He is confused as to which version really happened, which is understandable, gives the mixed-culture environment in which he has grown up. When his father leaves, Victor notes that, while "white fathers" have been abandoning their children forever, "Indian men have just learned how. That's how assimilation can work."

In the story, Victor grows up in an environment where he is subjected to both his mother's traditional Native-American values and his father's addiction to American influences. However, the latter are much more prominent. The mentions of Victor's father and his problems far outweigh his father's failed attempts to preserve his cultural heritage as well as any traditional associations with Victor's mother. In the end, Alexie is trying to show how, with each successive generation, the Native-American identity can be eroded some more, as children learn destructive American habits for themselves. In fact, it is fitting that Alexie focuses part of his story on Victor's memory, since if this cultural erosion trend continues, the Native-American identity could become a memory itself. Alexie seems to suggest this idea at the very end of the story, when Victor goes outside his house to wait for his father, who he has imagined is coming to get him. Says

Victor: "It was so quiet, a reservation kind of quiet, where you can hear somebody drinking whiskey on the rocks three miles away." When a colonized culture loses its heritage, it dies, as emphasized by the profound silence. All that is left over is the negative effect of assimilation, which in this case is represented by the sound of a person drinking alone in the dark. As Alan R. Velie notes in his review of the collection in *World Literature Today:* "A major theme of the book is the feeling of despair, guilt, and helplessness that overcomes Indians as they and their friends and relatives give up on life and lapse into unemployment and alcoholism."

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Dunham holds a bachelor's degree in English literature and a master's degree in communication. In the following essay, Dunham considers Alexie's story in relation to the impact of assimilation on Indian culture.

In Alexie's "Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock," the narrator, Victor, uses the word "assimilation" to describe how attributes of one culture are adopted by another culture, often resulting in the destruction of the culture adopting them. He states:

On a reservation, Indian men who abandon their children are treated worse than white fathers who do the same thing. It's because white men have been doing that forever and Indian men have just learned how. That's how assimilation can work.

"Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock" is Victor's account of how assimilation works in his family. He shows how his father's fascination with American popular culture—namely his obsession with pop music icon Jimi Hendrix—tears apart his family and undermines the values of his Indian culture.

Alexie begins the story by making a statement about assimilation with Victor's very first sentence: "During the sixties, my father was the perfect hippie, since all the hippies were trying to be Indians." The irony here is that Victor's father was not the perfect hippie. He had long hair, wore bellbottoms, smoked pot, dropped acid, loved rock and roll, and protested the United States' involvement in Vietnam, but he did not stand for peace. He was a warrior at heart, and the first thing Victor relates about him is how he severely beat a National Guard private with a rifle at a peace rally. Such an opening is significant because it creates a powerful image that introduces the reader to the story's main theme: failure to assimilate in an appropriate manner has destructive consequences.

As a result of that incident, Victor says, his father was arrested and sent to prison, but he got out just in time to hitchhike to Woodstock, where he witnessed a musical performance that changed him forever: Jimi Hendrix playing "The Star-Spangled Banner." His father tells him that it was just what he needed at that point in his life: "After all the s—— I'd been through, I figured Jimi must have known I was there in the crowd to play something like that. It was exactly how I felt." Victor claims that he "[doesn't] have any clue about what it meant for [his] father to be the only Indian who saw Jimi Hendrix play at Woodstock" and understands its significance only in terms of the consequences of his father's resulting obsession with Hendrix.

One consequence is frequent arguments between his parents. Although Victor does not recount every argument, the reader is led to believe that most of them had to do with Jimi Hendrix. The particular argument that Victor speaks about occurred during a family trip to Hendrix's grave in Seattle. Commenting on the untimely nature of Hendrix's

death, his father said, "Only the good die young," to which his mother replied, "No, only the crazy people choke to death on their own vomit." The ensuing dispute was not unlike the many others that Victor witnesses in his parents' marriage. As he says, "I was used to these battles."

Another consequence is his father's inward retreat, at first characterized by lone bouts of heavy drinking and later by frequent disappearances from the house. Victor remembers how his mother once tried to explain his father's behavior to him: "Your father just likes being alone more than he likes being with other people. Even me and you." But, this explanation is not entirely accurate. As Victor recalls, even when his father wanted to be alone, Jimi was always somebody he liked to be with. They began as "drinking buddies," with his father spending long evenings laughing, crying, and drinking beer while listening to Jimi play "The Star-Spangled Banner" on the stereo. They ended as traveling companions, with his father's desire to drink giving way to a new desire: getting away for hours, even days, on his new motorcycle with an old tape player strapped to the gas tank.

The final consequence is his parents' divorce and the subsequent abandonment by his father. At the time of his father's near fatal motorcycle accident, Victor relates, his mother had already decided she did not want to be married to him anymore. She had had enough of the arguing, the drunkenness, and the disappearances. She visited him in the hospital and helped nurse him back to health by quietly singing Indian tunes to him, but after he recovered, they separated for good. Understanding what happened, Victor asks his mother, "Was it because of Jimi Hendrix?," to which she replies, "Part of it, yeah. This might be the only marriage broken up by a dead guitar player." What is interesting about his mother's reply is that she only lays part of the blame on Hendrix. The remainder of the blame rests with both his father and mother.

Victor's father is to blame for the manner in which he responds to Jimi Hendrix's performance of "The Star-Spangled Banner" at Woodstock. This is not to say that his feelings at the time were inappropriate. They were, in fact, warranted and entirely justifiable. After all, here was Jimi Hendrix playing the American national anthem at an event where patriotism was less than fashionable and during a time when racial and political unrest were greater than at any point in America's history. And there was Victor's father, living like an outcast in what was once the land of his fathers, heir to prejudice and years of inequitable government polices, able to identify, better than most, with Jimi Hendrix's soulful rendition of the American national anthem. But, instead of inspiring him to live a richer and more meaningful life and encouraging him to bravely face the challenges of living in a racially polarized world, it impaired his ability to live at all, causing him to retreat into his own world. As he tells Victor, "I ain't interested in what's real. I'm interested in how things should be."

Unfortunately for Victor's father, it never occurs to him that he could be a force for positive change in the world, that he could help make things the way they should be. Like much of the music of the 1960s, "The Star-Spangled Banner" at Woodstock was a "call to arms," a rallying cry for people such as Victor's father to fight for justice in an unjust world. Victor's father, however, chose to surrender rather than fight. This, too, is

how assimilation can work. "The Star-Spangled Banner" at Woodstock should have motivated him to help make a difference in the world, but instead it alienated him from the world. "The Star-Spangled Banner" at Woodstock should have energized him to help make the world a better place, but instead it immobilized him, making him unfit for service to the world and his family.

As a result of having to live with her husband's immobilizing obsession with Hendrix, his mother retreats to the life she knew when she was younger. She travels to powwows and begins to dance again. She immerses herself in the music, customs, and traditions of her native culture. In so doing, she finds a refuge from the destructive effects of the foreign culture that violated the sanctity of her home with motorcycles and guitars. Her response to Hendrix, then, is a rejection of assimilation and, hence, a rejection of her husband. Such is her part in the breakup of their marriage.

Interestingly enough, Victor is never trapped between the two distinctly different worlds in which his parents lived. He is a loving son who looks at both sides with sympathy and compassion. Victor sees how his father's obsession with Hendrix breaks apart his family. He also sees how his mother's rejection of white American pop culture—with Jimi Hendrix ironically included—contributes to the breakup. But, because of his own appreciation of Hendrix, Victor comes to the conclusion that assimilation is something far more complex than simply adopting white men's bad behavior.

After his father leaves for good, Victor draws comfort from the music of Jimi Hendrix and Robert Johnson. He says, "On those nights I missed him most I listened to music. Not always Jimi Hendrix. Usually I listened to the blues. Robert Johnson mostly." On one particular night, Victor imagines that he hears his father's motorcycle outside and his father yelling, "Victor, let's go for a ride." He goes out and finds the driveway empty, so he stands on the porch all night and imagines he hears motorcycles and guitars. The fact that Victor can derive comfort from these sounds is significant because it is a response unlike what his father's would have been. Instead of causing him despair, these sounds offer the hope that maybe someday his father will return home. These sounds of American pop culture are an inspiration for this Indian boy to go on; so when the sun comes up and shines brightly, he knows that it is time to go inside and have breakfast with his mother. This, too, is how assimilation can work. This is how assimilation should work.

Source: Timothy Dunham, Critical Essay on "Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, DeNuccio examines selection of stories from Alexie's collection, looking closely at how the Native-American characters "wage daily battle against small humiliations and perennial hurts."

The Spokane Indian characters in Sherman Alexie's short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* wage daily battle against small humiliations and perennial hurts. Situated on a reservation where the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) houses, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) trucks, and commodity foods continually mirror paternalism and dependency, and where "tribal ties" and a cohesive "sense of community" have waned, Alexie's characters confront the dilemma of how to be "real Indians," of how to find "their true names, their adult names," of how to find a warrior dignity and courage when it is "too late to be warriors in the old way," of how to ameliorate what Adrian C. Louis has termed "the ghost-pain of history"—that haunting sense of personal and cultural loss that generates a paralyzing sense of ineffectuality. They struggle to cope with passivity, cynicism, and despair to find healing for the pain that turns into self-pity and the anger that turns into self-loathing.

One of Alexie's characters, Thomas Buildsthe-Fire, a Spokane storyteller, articulates a useful image for understanding the distress and anguish these characters experience: *"There are things you should learn,"* he tells Victor and Junior, two young Spokanes who either narrate or are featured in 18 of the collection's 22 stories. "Your past is a skeleton walking one step behind you, and your future is a skeleton walking one step in front of you." Indians, thus, are always *"trapped in the now."* But the skeletons are "not necessarily evil, unless you let them be." Because "these skeletons are made of memories, dreams, and voices," and because they are "wrapped up in the now," it becomes imperative to "keep moving, keep walking, in step with your skeletons." To stop or slow down, to "slow dance" with one's skeletons, risks being caught "in the in-between, between touching and becoming," the immediately felt and the potentially experienced. Such a situation severs the necessary relation between the structure of experience that at any one moment has shaped each life and the structure of ongoing time to which that life must continuously adapt and in which it develops. Keeping in step is not easy, however, for "your skeletons will talk to you, tell you to sit down and take a rest, [. . .] make you promises, tell you all the things you want to hear." They can "dress up" as seductive women, as a best friend offering a drink, as parents offering gifts. But, "no matter what they do," Thomas warns, "keep walking, keep moving."

Thomas's image of the skeletons suggests that Indian subjectivity is dialogic, an interplay of perspectives and points of view that Bakhtin describes as "a plurality of unmerged consciousness." The self is positioned in a social space replete with memories, dreams, and voices that invite attention and response, that must be accommodated and negotiated if the self as an individual and a tribal subject is to emerge. Such negotiation, although paramount, is never easy. Memories, dreams, and voices form a dense network of social significations. They bear traces, are mediated by social relations and cultural dynamics, are inflected by family, friends, lovers, traditions,

mass media, history. The term *Indian* names a subject position traversed by competing claims, saturated by multiple insinuations, the confusion or mastering force of which can induce a capitulation that Thomas identifies as failing to keep "in step with your skeletons." Such capitulation forecloses choice, and the result is often self-sabotage. Commenting on what appears to a white state trooper as an unmotivated suicide by a successful tribal member, Junior notes that "when we look in the mirror, see the history of our tribe in our eyes, taste failure in the tap water, and shake with old tears, we understand completely." To "keep moving, keep walking, in step with your skeletons," then, suggests the necessity of listening to *and answering* the multiple voices that clamor for attention, a process of accommodation *and negotiation* that resists totalization and keeps the self "unconsummated" and "yet-to-be" (*Art and Answerability* . . .), moving always toward "becoming" rather than trapped "between touching and becoming," moving so that some coherent story of the self can be discovered. Thomas's image of the skeletons resonates throughout the collection's 22 stories, precisely because so many characters have fallen out of step and, thus, are suspended, passively and destructively, in a seemingly incoherent present.

Approximately enough, the collection's opening story, "Every Little Hurricane," displays the provenance of those elements that problematize Indian subjectivity. Significantly, Alexie sets the story at a New Year's Eve party ushering in 1976, the bicentennial year. Nine-year-old Victor, whose parents are hosting the party, awakens to what he thinks is a hurricane but is really a metaphor Alexie uses to represent Victor's experience of the intensifying anger and painful memories, unleashed by alcohol, that circulate among the Indian partygoers. Victor's father, for instance, remembers his father being spit on at a Spokane bus stop; his mother remembers being involuntarily sterilized by an Indian Health Service (IHS) doctor after Victor's birth; his uncles Adolph and Arnold fight savagely because each reminds the other of childhood poverty so great that they hid crackers in their bedroom so they wouldn't have to go to bed hungry. Lying in his basement bedroom, Victor thinks he sees the ceiling lower "with the weight of each Indian's pain, until it was just inches from [his] nose." As the adults' drunken rage fills the house, it blends with and feeds Victor's own nightmare fears of drowning in the rain, of alcoholic "fluids swallowing him." for at the age of five he had witnessed at a powwow an Indian man drown after passing out and falling "facedown into the water collected in a tire track." "Even at five," the narrator notes, "Victor understood what that meant, how it defined nearly everything." Seeking the comfort of physical connection, he lies between his unconscious parents, and, putting a hand on each of their stomachs, feels "enough hunger in both, enough movement, enough geography and history, enough of everything to destroy the reservations." As this image suggests, the confluence of past currents of suffering meet in Victor.

Given the intensity of the pain that presses upon Indian subjectivity, it is not surprising that the adults and their children get caught "in the inbetween, between touching and becoming." The now of felt experience becomes ceaseless repetition of what has been. Without a viable counterbalance of Spokane culture—a point Alexie implies by setting his opening story on the eve of America's bicentennial festivities—the self appears finalized, unmodifiable because personal history appears consumed by the totalizing narrative of History. There is no sense of particularity, of difference that prevents the self

from being absorbed into the larger culture's dominant narrative, no way to position the self so that its story unfolds within, not into, ongoing time, no "outsidedness" (*Speech Genres* . . .) where the choice to keep moving in step with one's skeletons keeps the impinging or "touching" now provisionally open to "becoming."

Victor's father, for example, has stopped walking in step with his skeletons altogether by retreating into an idealized moment twenty years earlier. Active in the Vietnam War protest movement and jailed for assaulting a National Guardsman, Victor's father endures two years of racial warfare in prison. On his release, he hitchhikes to Woodstock, arriving just in time to hear Jimi Hendrix's performance of "The Star-Spangled Banner." "'After all the [sh——] I'd been through,'" he tells Victor, '" I figured Jimi must have known I was there in the crowd to play something like that. It was exactly how I felt.'" Twenty years later, he still plays the song and dissolves into tears in memory of a pure moment of connection and understanding, from which he views all his subsequent life as a declension. At thirteen, Victor finds he cannot penetrate his father's self-imposed exile from the painful memories of those twenty years and, thus, Victor loses the potentially usable experiences, the realized knowledge, those twenty years contain. David Murray has noted that "the absent or failed father," a common feature in Indian texts, often symbolizes "the rupture and absence of guidelines from the past, and consequent alienation from a cultural heritage." "'I ain't interested in what's real,'" Victor's father tells him. "'I'm interested in how things should be.'" What Victor learns from his father is a strategy that shields him from pain but surrenders the connectedness to events that opens them to meaning: "instead of remembering the bad things, remember what happened immediately before. That's what I learned from my father."

Consequently, the struggle to sort through fractious memories, dreams, and voices dogs Victor into young adulthood. In the story "A Drug Called Tradition" Big Mom, the Spokane Tribe's spiritual leader, gives Victor a small drum as a "pager" to summon her in times of need. Victor doubts the drum's efficacy and admits he has never used it. Yet, even after Big Mom dies, he keeps it "really close," because it is "the only religion I have," and "I think if I played it a little, it might fill up the whole world." Victor is situated at a boundary between cultural rejection and cultural connection, torn between skepticism toward the heritage of traditional spirituality and the desire to retain that heritage as a possible source of plenitude to "fill up" a world seemingly bereft of continuity. Much the same irresolution marks his relationship with the storytelling Thomas, whom he has bullied since childhood and whose stories he ignores, precisely because, for Victor, those stories register cultural loss. Yet, Victor admits, when Thomas "stopped looking at me, I was hurt. How do you explain that?"

The story "All I Wanted To Do Was Dance" a opens with Victor drunk and reeling wildly on barroom dancefloor. Suddenly, he sees "the faces of his past. He recognized Niel Armstrong and Christopher Columbus, his mother and father, James Dean, Sal Mineo, Natalie Wood." He then recalls himself as a young boy, "fancydancing in the same outfit his father wore as a child." Looking "into the crowd for approval," he sees his mother and father, "both drunk" and staggering, the "other kind of dancing" that "was nothing new." The continuous history of Euro-American dominance, emblematize by Columbus

and Armstrong, coupled with the shameful spectacle of his parents, have invalidated fancydancing as a culturally specific signifying practice by which he can position himself within a localized system of meaning. In its place Hollywood supplies a mass-mediated construction, the rebel without a cause, a subject position at once disenfranchising and inauthentic.

Similarly, a bewildering mix of personal experience, memory, dream, and history affects Junior in "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven." Living in Seattle and involved in a loving but contentious relationship with a white kindergarten teacher, Junior dreams she is "a missionary's wife" and he is "a minor war chief" who is her clandestine lover. Her husband discovers their relationship and shoots him. "Disembodied," Junior watches as his murder provokes massive and bloody warfare between several tribes of Indians and the U.S. Cavalry. Junior's "most vivid image of that dream," however, is three mounted soldiers playing "polo with a dead Indian woman's head," an image he at first considers "a product of my anger and imagination," but which he subsequently discovers in histories of war in "the Old West" and journalistic accounts of atrocities "in places like El Salvador." This blurring of internal and external, wherein private nightmare is simultaneously public record disseminated across space and time, terrifies Junior. He finds himself both inside and outside his own experience, caught in the seam between past and present, agent and object, at once the author of a unique narrative expressing his own "anger and imagination" and an authored character in an old and ongoing story of racial hatred. The dream is and is not his own; he is himself and a historical clone. Moreover, the dream redoubles this ambiguity: killed early on, he haunts the scene, a disembodied witness of the carnage his sexual relationship with the white woman has produced. At some level, then, Junior experiences his cross-racial relationship as transgressive, a betrayal, perhaps, of tribal hopes that, as "a smart kid" and "former college student," he would provide the model for a "new kind of warrior."

Returning to the reservation, Junior attempts to reestablish a connection with his personal past through basketball: "I'd been a good player in high school, nearly great. [. . .] I liked the way the ball felt in my hands and the way my feet felt inside my shoes." The pleasure of recapturing his skill is short-lived, however; the entire history of Indianwhite relations repeats itself on the night he is "ready to play for real." After some initial success, the white son of the reservation BIA chief takes control of the game away from Junior. "He was better that day," Junior admits, "and every other day." The basketball court, like the battlefield he dreamed of in Seattle, becomes for Junior a scene of failure and betrayal. The "BIA kid needed to be beaten by an Indian," and the watching tribal members have invested their hopes in him, "one of their old and dusty heroes." The white boy, however, "played Indian ball, fast and loose," and, having appropriated the Indian style, Junior knows he is "better than all the Indians there."

The next day Junior drives to Spokane and takes a job "typing and answering phones" for a "high school exchange program." The racial anonymity he finds as a detached telephone voice is compromised when his Seattle lover calls. "The connection was good," Junior notes, an ironic counterpoint to the lack of emotional clarity characterizing their conversation.

"What's going to happen to us?" I asked her and wished I had the answer for myself.

"I don't know," she said. "I want to change the world."

The desire to direct change is not an option for Junior; as his dream and the basketball game have demonstrated, he can only experience its consequences. His relationship with his white lover, he realizes, is riven by an unbridgeable racial difference that distributes unequally the capacity for, even the imagining of, performative agency. The woman he remembers, "whose ghost has haunted" him, is, irreconcilably, a "real person" he can never know, a person whose otherness remains irreducible.

At their worst, the contending memories, voices, and dreams reach a kind of critical mass that impels Victor and Junior to racial abjection. In "Amusements," Victor comes across a fellow tribesman, Dirty Joe, lying in a drunken stupor on a carnival midway. In an attempt to dissociate himself from a sight that evokes the contemptuous laughter of passing white tourists, Victor plays a practical joke on Dirty Joe by putting him on a roller coaster. When a crowd of whites gathers, their "open mouths grown large and deafening" with laughter, Victor suddenly realizes his complicity with those whites in a long history of cultural degradation. He has been, he sees, a "court jester" who has poured "Thunderbird wine into the Holy Grail," a freak like "the Fat Lady" and "the Dog-Faced Boy"— an "Indian who offered up another Indian like some treaty." Victor recognizes, in other words, that he has reduced himself from speaking subject of his own discourse to sign in official discourse, effectually removing himself from his own history. His complicity is a cultural forgetting or dismembering that, according to ethnologist Robert Cantwell, permits "parts and pieces of social identity" to signify only insofar as they comport with and consolidate the cultural myths of society at large. "[L]ike some treaty," then, Victor's betrayal of Dirty Joe, multiplied by many others many times, has contributed to "the folding shut of the good part of [the] past."

Junior, too, realizes the complicity involved in his denial of Indian identity. While in college he attended a basketball game after partying with a group of whites from his dormitory. One of the players on the opposing team is a twenty-eightyear-old who has overcome his inner-city Los Angeles upbringing and a stint in prison. Junior realizes that he and the basketball player "had a whole lot in common. Much more in common than I had with those white boys I was drunk with." Nevertheless, he joins in the vicious taunting that greets the player's entrance on the court, an act that in its replication of white bigotry and in its defiance of shared experience actually constitutes self-subversion. Little wonder, then, that Junior describes his time in the city in terms of debilitating ineffectuality: "'It's like a bad dream you never wake up from. [. . .] Standing completely stilt on an escalator that will not move, but I didn't have the courage to climb the stairs by myself.'" Like Victor, Junior is immobilized by the kind of double consciousness W. E. B. Dubois describes as "the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."

Alexie's Indian characters are caught, as Bakhtin puts it, in the "framework of *other people's* words" about them, a framework that can "finalize and deaden" the self. But

Alexie also demonstrates that in his characters "there is always something that only [they themselves] can reveal, in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse, something that does not submit to an externalizing second-hand definition" (*Problems* . . .). And Alexie again uses the Spokane storyteller Thomas Builds-the-Fire to explain this resistant something.

We are all given one thing by which our lives are measured, one determination. Mine are the stories which can change or not change the world. It doesn't matter which as long as I continue to tell the stories. [. . .] They are all I have. It's all I can do.

Thomas's "one determination" posits subjectivity as both determined and particular, given, and its own measure of value. There is a personal narrative that unfolds within the larger culture's master narrative, which situates an individual subjectivity within the cultural topography and keeps it in step with the skeletons of past and future. For Thomas, only recognizing and choosing to follow that "one determination" matters. Thomas himself is widely ignored by his tribe, yet he tells his stories, stories that he does not author but that come to him from the culturally specific ground to which he is connected and which his storytelling articulates. What Thomas transmits, then, is the persistence and adaptability of Spokane signifying practices.

Indeed, those of Alexie's characters in step with their skeletons have in common a connection, or a re-connection, to tribal tradition. Victor's Aunt Nezzy, by donning the "heaviest beaded dress" she has made and finding "the strength to take the first step, then another quick one," overcomes 30 years of casual cruelty by her family and the memory of being hoodwinked into a tubal ligation by an IHS administrator. Nezzy then "heard drums, she heard singing, she danced. Dancing that way, she knew things were beginning to change"; for, as she had earlier predicted, the woman "who can carry the weight of this dress on her back [. . .] will save us all." Victor's mother, after her husband's desertion, "traveled to powwows, started to dance again. She was a champion traditional dancer when she was younger." Having revived her traditional dancing ability enables her to provide a countering nurture to the emptiness caused by her husband's abandonment, not just for herself, but for thirteen-year-old Victor as well. After a night spent futilely waiting for his father's return, Victor "knew it was time to go back inside to my mother. She made breakfast for both of us and we ate until we were full." Uncle Moses responds to the "unplanned kindness" of his young friend Arnold by telling it to him as a story, thereby creating, as the title of the story indicates, a "good story," one to be repeated—as the narrator himself is doing—and that, like Moses's house, "would stand even years after Moses died," to nourish "the tribal imagination" and "ensure survival." The twenty-year-old narrator of "Jesus Christ's Half-Brother Is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation" accedes to tradition by accepting responsibility for an infant whose life he has saved. Raising young James saves the narrator as well. He learns that "we should be living for each other instead [of dying] for each other," and that such solicitude generates an ethic of reciprocal care: "I know when I am old and sick and ready to die that James will wash my body and take care of my wastes. He'll carry me from HUD house to sweathouse and he will clean my wounds. And he will talk and teach me something new every day."

Victor and Junior both manage to find their "one determination" and, thereby, negotiate the contentious memories, dreams, and voices that attenuate their lives. In "All I Wanted To Do Is Dance," Victor has returned "home" to the reservation from the city and a failed romance with a white woman, an experience, he says, that seemed like "being lost in the desert for forty years." Despondent and drinking heavily, he meets a Cherokee who tells him that "the difference between a real Indian and a fake Indian" is that "a real Indian got blisters on his feet;" a "fake Indian got blisters on his ass." The allusion to the 1,200-mile Trail of Tears, a literal wandering in the desert more profoundly painful than the self-pity occasioned by a lost love, is not lost on Victor. He realizes that fancydancing—all he ever really wanted to do— also blisters the feet. His "one determination" authenticates him as a "real Indian." The story concludes, aptly enough, on a crest of conjunctions, progressive verbs, and modals that suggest possibility will become probability:

And he was walking down this road and tomorrow maybe he would be walking down another road and maybe tomorrow he would be dancing. Victor might be dancing.

Yes, Victor would be dancing.

And, presumably, getting blisters!

Junior gets a new name that, in its honest acknowledgment of "the worst thing I ever did"— his hateful taunting of the inner-city Los Angeles basketball player—reconciles him to and releases him from that guilt-laden memory and the larger personal failures it has come to emblematize. "I was special," Junior explains, "a former college student, a smart kid. I was one of those Indians who was supposed to make it. [. . .] I was the new kind of warrior." Instead, Junior left college, fled the city, and left behind a son whom he is allowed to see only six days a month. Junior's new name is given by Norma Many Horses, a widely respected "cultural lifeguard," according to Junior, "watching out for those of us that were so close to drowning." After revealing his secret to Norma, Junior notes that "she treated me differently for about a year," and he assumes she "wouldn't ever forgive me." She does, however, and signals her forgiveness by giving Junior a "new Indian name": Pete Rose. "[Y]ou two got a whole lot in common," she explains. After all his "greatness, he's only remembered for the bad stuff" and "[t]hat ain't right." Sometime later, Norma seeks Junior out:

"Pete Rose," she said. "They just voted to keep you out of the Hall of Fame. I'm sorry. But I still love you."

"Yeah, I know, Norma. I love you, too."

Where Junior had previously denied, out of self-abnegating shame, someone with whom he had "a whole lot in common," he now acknowledges a commonality of experience that frankly concedes not just his error, but also its ineradicability, its permanence a part of his psychological terrain. Although it is unfair that an entire life is marked by "the bad stuff," accepting such a condition requires courage and breaks the cycle by which past failures are repeated in the present. In giving him a "true" name, an

"adult" name—the lack of which Thomas identified as "the problem with Indians these days," Norma, the "cultural lifeguard," has taught Junior what he thought he could never learn—forgiveness— and opened for him the possibility of an identity he thought he had forfeited—a "new kind of warrior."

It is important to see that in linking Thomas's "one determination" to a localized cultural practice Alexie is not advocating a simple return to some traditional tribal past. Such a return ignores Thomas's point that the past and future are "wrapped up in the now," It is a retreat into cultural monologism that, politically, serves bureaucratic interests because, pragmatically, it disjoins past and present, thereby avoiding the necessity, or even the inclination, of situating oneself in relation to modem day realities, to "the now" Moreover, a traditional tribal past simply no longer exists. It has been coopted, and that co-optation has altered Indian subjectivity. Alexie's frequent use of "five hundred years" as a sort of grammatical intensifier makes clear that history has redefined what being Indian means. Victor points to a hybridization that has attenuated biological identity and vitiated cultural identity: "all the years have changed more than the shape of our blood and eyes. We wear fear like a turquoise choker, like a familiar shawl"

The pun on "choker" figures all too well a point Adrian C. Louis makes in his novel Skins: Indians have "learned to oppress themselves." Likewise, Junior reflects on "pain, how each of us constructs our past to justify what we feel now. How each successive pain distorts the preceding" to the point where nothing is "aboriginal or recognizable." Having internalized the otherness by which they have historically been defined, Indians become like the transistor radio that the narrator of the story "Distances" finds. Though "no imperfection" is evident on its exterior, it does not work. The problem, he suggests, "the mistakes," are "inside, where you couldn't see, couldn't reach." Or, like the diabetes Junior has inherited from his father, five hundred years of history have ceased working "like a criminal, breaking and entering," instead, for Indians in the late 20th century, it works "just like a lover, hurting you from the inside."

The apparently naturalized historical forces that have decentered and determined Indian subjectivity certainly compromise the ability to discern and to choose to affirm the "one determination" that Thomas opposes to the derailing skeletons of past and future. Yet, those of Alexie's characters who refuse to stop, who stay in step, do manage to see "inside," do manage to conduct a clarifying introspection, do choose to align themselves with some still viable traditional practice that prevents "the folding shut of the good part of [their] past" and that works through and in time as a usable ground for identity construction, that establishes the self as a structure of relation between past, present, and future. Indeed, Thomas teaches Victor this lesson in the aptly named story "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona." Feeling that "[h]e owed Thomas something" for helping fund their trip to Phoenix to claim the cremated remains of his father, Victor offers Thomas half his father's ashes. Thomas accepts the gift and tells a story:

"I'm going to travel to Spokane Falls one last time and toss these ashes into the water. And your father will rise like a salmon, leap over the bridge, over me, and find his way home. It will be beautiful. His teeth will shine like silver, like a rainbow. He will rise, Victor, he will rise."

Victor had in mind a similar method of disposing of the ashes but acknowledges,

"[. . .] I didn't imagine my father looking anything like a salmon. I thought it'd be like cleaning the attic or something. Like letting things go after they've stopped having any use."

"Nothing stops, cousin," Thomas said, "nothing stops."

Thomas demonstrates to Victor the power of Spokane myth to synthesize the twin domains of private and tribal experience and reveals the boundary that Victor has imposed between them as a restriction, not constituent, of identity. Thomas challenges Victor's belief that he can sweep his father from memory, abandon the father, who abandoned him. Thomas's story inserts Victor's father in a process-laden narrative that assigns cultural significance to a father whom Victor had considered obsolescent and dispensable. In effect, then, Thomas's story forces Victor to reread and, thus, reinterpret his father as a cultural tie, a point of continuity with the past, a fusion of "historical memory and subjectivity" (Said . . .) that never "stops," that, like the mythic phoenix, will always "rise," a continual story of self emerging "from the ash of older stories."

Stories, then, teach survival. They re-member, bridging the rupture created by "what we have lost," reconnecting time to aspect, past and present to progressive and perfective. Talking stories yields something "aboriginal and recognizable," something, as Thomas says, "by which our lives are measured." In the story "Family Portrait," Junior, contemplating his hands, is led to an acute realization of cultural loss:

Years ago, the hands might have held the spear that held the salmon that held the dream of the tribe. Years ago, the hands might have touched the hands of the dark-skinned men who touched medicine and the magic of ordinary gods.

He then recalls a story his father told about "the first television he ever saw." It had "just one channel and all it showed was a woman sitting on top of the same television. Over and over until it hurt your eyes and head." That image, persistently reflexive, depicts the kind of storytelling Alexie himself enacts: an unsparing examination of what is gone and what remains. That, Junior declares, is "how we find our history." And repossess it, too, for although such storytelling must, of necessity, measure "heartbreak" and "fear," it also becomes the means "by which we measure the beginning of all our lives," the means "by which we measure all our stories, until we understand that one story"— the official historiography—"can never be all." Like the television that continuously frames the image it continuously represents, broadcasting in the present its backward gaze, Alexie's storytelling links "now" with "then," Indian lives with "five hundred years of convenient lies," repeatedly, for though "it hurt[s] your eyes and head" it speaks survival.

Source: Jerome DeNuccio, "Slow Dancing with Skeletons: Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven," in Critique,* Vol. 44, No. 1, Fall 2002, pp. 86-96.

Adaptations

Alexie's official website, www.Fallsapart.com, features a wide variety of resources on the author, including a biography, interviews, information on his books and films, and details about his current projects.

Several stories from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven,* especially "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," were drawn on for the film adaptation *Smoke Signals.* The film, written by Alexie, was billed as the first film with an all-Native-American cast and crew. It was produced by ShadowCatcher Entertainment and released by Miramax Films in 1998. The film, which featured Adam Beach in the role of Victor, won the 1998 Sundance Film Festival's audience award. It was published as a screenplay by Talk Miramax Books in 1998 and was released on VHS and DVD from Miramax Home Entertainment in 2001.

Topics for Further Study

Choose another culture in history that has been affected by colonization. Compare this civilization to the Native-American civilization, paying particular attention to the effects on the culture's identity and ability to govern itself.

Choose one Native American who grew up on a reservation—besides Alexie—who has become a success. Compare this person's life story to Alexie's life story, focusing on any social factors that helped lead to each person's success.

On a map of the current United States, plot the various methods that were used to acquire each area from Native Americans, including a date and description at the site of each major land acquisition. On a separate map, outline each current, federally funded Native-American reservation, including the date it was founded and a short description. Compare the two maps.

Choose an actual band member who played at Woodstock, research this person's life, and put yourself in this person's place at the music festival. Write a journal entry that sums up one day of your Woodstock experience, using your research to support your ideas.

Jimi Hendrix became famous and died within a very short time. Research other young, twentieth-century music stars, actors, or other celebrities who have died from alcohol or drug abuse, and discuss any trends among these deaths. Finally, discuss efforts that are being made both within the entertainment community and by outsiders to prevent these deaths.

Compare and Contrast

Late 1960s: The Woodstock Music and Art Fair, one of the most famous rock festivals in history, is held August 15-17, 1969, on a farm in Bethel, New York. It is organized by four inexperienced promoters, who encounter massive problems when the festival draws ten times more people than they expected, taxing the available food, water, and medical resources. Still, despite these and other problems such as drug overdoses, most remember Woodstock fondly, and it quickly becomes a legend.

Today: Two Woodstock revivals—one on the twenty-fifth anniversary in 1994 and one in 1999—are also memorable, but for different reasons. The first revival features better organization, while at the second, a riot breaks out. However, both fail to live up to the legend of the original.

Late 1960s: In 1969, a group of Native Americans calling themselves the Indians of All Tribes seizes Alcatraz, the island-based prison in San Francisco Bay that has been closed since 1963. The group intends to turn the decaying prison facility into a Native-American university, cultural center, and museum. They claim that this is within their rights, because an 1868 Sioux treaty says they can occupy government surplus land like Alcatraz. They offer to buy the island for twenty-four dollars—the same price that white settlers paid to Native Americans for Manhattan island three centuries ago. They occupy Alcatraz peacefully for twenty months, ignoring requests by the federal government to leave, until they are removed by federal marshals in 1971.

Today: Since its inception in 1972, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area—the largest urban park in the world—has administered control over Alcatraz. There are few attempts to renovate or repair the facility, in which some areas are still unsafe and closed off to the public. Despite this fact, Alcatraz is attracting almost one million visitors annually by the mid-1990s.

Late 1960s: N. Scott Momaday, a Native-American author, wins the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1969 for his novel *House Made of Dawn.* The novel depicts the difficulties Native Americans face when trying to fit in among other Americans, and it helps spark an increase in fiction and nonfiction writing by and about Native Americans.

Today: Alexie is one of many Native-American authors who have earned critical and popular success with works that depict the plight of the modern Native American. Other authors include Louise Erdrich and Leslie Marmon Silko.

What Do I Read Next?

Like many of his works, Alexie's *The Business of Fancydancing* (1992), a collection of poems and short stories, depicts life on the Spokane Indian Reservation. In this collection, Alexie created characters and addressed themes that he has visited again in subsequent works.

Alexie's first novel, *Reservation Blues* (1995), once again features characters that Alexie made famous in his earlier collections, including Victor from "Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock." The story details the experiences of Coyote Springs, an all-Native-American, Catholic rock band from the Spokane Indian Reservation, which gets its big break after the band members acquire the guitar of blues legend Robert Johnson.

When Alexie was in his influential poetry class at Washington State University, his professor, Alex Kuo, suggested that he read *Songs from This Earth on Turtle's Back* (1983). The book, an anthology of Native-American poetry edited by Joseph Bruchac, inspired Alexie to write his first poem.

In 1984, Louise Erdrich, a woman of Chippewa Indian and German-American heritage, published her book *Love Medicine.* Although some have labeled it a novel, others consider it a collection of interlinked short stories like *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven.* The multiplenarrator book tells the stories of two Native-American families living in and around a reservation. Erdrich issued an expanded version of the book, which is the first in a series, in 1993.

Much of Alexie's fiction and poetry draws upon experiences from his own life. Alexie has also written autobiographical essays. In *Here First: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers* (2000), editors Arnold Krupat and Brian Swann collect essays from Alexie and more than twenty other writers.

N. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *House Made of Dawn* (1968), is commonly acknowledged as the work that sparked the modern renaissance in Native-American literature. The novel tells the story of Abel, a Native American who returns home from fighting in World War II and has trouble adjusting to life in the modern Anglo world.

Further Study

Allen, Paula Gunn, *Off the Reservation: Reflections on Boundary-Busting, Border-Crossing Loose Cannons,* Beacon Press, 1999.

In this collection of essays, Allen examines the boundaries between Anglo and Native-American cultures from a feminine perspective, critiquing many of the conventions of Western society in the process.

McDermott, John, and Eddie Kramer, *Hendrix: Setting the Record Straight,* Warner Books, 1992.

This book is the definitive account of Hendrix's music career. Written entirely from first person accounts— including the recollections of Kramer, Hendrix's influential producer —the book gives in-depth, behindthe-scenes coverage of the rock legend.

Nies, Judith, *Native American History: A Chronology of a Culture's Vast Achievements and Their Links to World Events,* Ballantine Books, 1996.

Nies gives a thorough timeline of the major events in Native-American history. Using a two-column format, she places these events next to the other world events from the same year, giving readers a context within which to place the Native-American events. The book covers prehistoric times until 1996, and each major time period is prefaced by a short overview.

Peat, F. David, *Lighting the Seventh Fire: The Spiritual Ways, Healing, and Science of the Native American,* Birch Lane Press, 1994.

Peat, a physicist and author, first came in contact with the scientific beliefs of Native Americans in the 1980s. In this book, he gives a complete overview of science in the Native-American culture, including ceremonies of renewal, sacred mathematics, healing and disease, time, and language.

Rosenman, Joel, John Roberts, and Robert Pilpel, *Young Men with Unlimited Capital: The Story of Woodstock,* Scrivenery Press, 1999.

Although the Woodstock Music and Art Fair of 1969 has become a landmark event of an age, many people are unaware that the festival was generated through an advertisement placed by Rosenman and Roberts in the *New York Times.* This book gives a behind-the-scenes look at the creation of Woodstock and at the event itself, which spawned a number of complaints, lawsuits, a death, births, medical emergencies, and other unforeseen problems for the festival organizers.

Thornton, Russel, ed., *Studying Native America: Problems and Prospects,* University of Wisconsin Press, 1999.

Thornton, a Cherokee Indian and professor of anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles, collects a number of essays by various contributors. The essays concern the various issues involved in developing Native-American studies programs that are culturally and historically accurate. Most contributors address the fact that traditional academic methods do not always work for Native-American studies.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

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