Ten Little Indians Study Guide

Ten Little Indians by Sherman Alexie

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This collection of nine short stories reveals multiple facets of life in contemporary America as experienced by Native Americans. Although there seems to be strongly autobiographical material in all of the stories, this material is presented through various lead characters who all appear to be different objectifications of the author, or literary masks, used to tell the stories. All stories are filled with humor and pathos. The conflict between indigenous Native American tribal culture and the mainstream white contemporary American culture runs through all the stories, giving them an extraordinary humanity as pain and heartbreak coexist with redemption and humor.

"The Search Engine" concerns a young and gifted Indian girl who as a student at Washington State University nurtures a dream of becoming a poet. She discovers a volume of poetry by a Native American named Harlan Atwater and decides to contact him. She eventually tracks him down in Seattle and realizes he is a rather ordinary person who let his dreams die.

"Lawyer's League" presents the existential dilemma of an ambitious young Native American who hopes to someday become president. However, his conflicts over his own racial identity and exactly how he should present himself in a majority white culture threaten not only his ambitions but also his sanity.

"Can I Get a Witness?" is a post-September 11 story that uses the device of a homegrown terrorist bombing to unmask two characters who lead empty lives. The main character is a nameless middle-aged Spokane Indian woman married to a man she doesn't love and who has two sons she can't abide. After a brief moment when it seems she may connect with the man who takes her to his apartment, she is once more alone and adrift in the world

"Do Not Go Gentle" is s touching, comic story that shows how adaptable Native Americans can be in using tribal custom for their survival in the modern, high-tech world. The setting is a children's hospital in Seattle, where two Indians perform an unusual, hilarious and ultimately effective healing ritual for their infant son.

"Flight Patterns" brings together two Americans of utterly different ethnic backgrounds but dark complexions - one a Native American businessman and the other a political refugee from Ethiopia who is a cab driver. They discover a bond that brings them close in a short period of time.

"The Life and Times of Estelle Walks Above" is a bittersweet story recollected by the narrator about his teenage years with his single, smart, politically progressive mother. The narrator curses his absent father, yearns for a positive male figure and thinks his mother is daffy, but he finally confesses his love for her and all that she does for him.

"Do You Know Where I Am" is a touching, humorous love story about a pair of Native American elitist college students who discover each other and are united over a stray cat.

"What You Pawn I Will Redeem" takes the reader deep into the heart of the grief, loss, absurdity and struggle of Native-Americans as an Indian tries to purchase from a white pawn broker in Seattle a set of "fancy dance" regalia stolen from his grandmother years earlier.

"What Ever Happened to Frank Snake Church?" tells the story of a Native American forest ranger who quits his job after the death of his father and makes basketball an obsession and a way to honor his dead parents.

"The Search Engine"

"The Search Engine" Summary

Corliss Joseph is a shy nineteen-year-old Native American bookworm and student at Washington State University who stumbles (literally) upon a book of poems by a mysterious writer called Harlan Atwater who claims to be a Spokane Indian. She thumbs through the book and finds a poem that fascinates her. Although Corliss is herself a Spokane Indian, the writer's name calls forth no memories or associations. When she checks the book out of the library, she finds that she is the first person to have read it, even though it had been on the shelves since 1972.

When Corliss brings the book home with another book of poetry by W.H. Auden, she is subjected to gentle but persistent teasing by her father and uncles, who do not understand why she wants to read poetry, and especially poetry by a non-Indian. Her father expects her to become a lawyer, and her mother hopes Corliss will be a doctor - even going so far as to lie to friends that she's in Harvard Medical School. Unsettled by the book of poems, Corliss asks her mother if she's ever heard of Harlan Atwater, and she answers that she's not heard of the book or the poet. Corliss looks for clues on the Internet and finds nothing. Then she unearths an interview with him published in an alternative Seattle newspaper thirty years earlier. In the interview, Atwater mentions the importance of tribe, ancestors, ceremony and Native American culture - and yet his tribe has never heard of him.

Corliss finds a listing for the writer in the 1971 *Who's Who Among American Writers*, calls the Seattle phone number and gets hold of a disagreeable old man who finally confesses that he used the name Harlan Atwater "when I wrote poems." He tells Corliss that he was born on the Spokane Indian Reservation in 1947 but hasn't been back in thirty years and doesn't consider himself a very good Indian. Then he abruptly wishes her well and hangs up. Undeterred, Corliss buys a bus ticket to Seattle, arrives eight hours later and wanders the streets looking at skyscrapers. She encounters a homeless white man whom she invites to McDonald's, where they share lunch. He tells her he was an economics professor who one day stood on the college green and shouted, "I want some respect!" repeatedly, until one of his students hugged him. He began crying and couldn't stop. He took a leave of absence, sold his home, spent his money and ended up homeless.

Corliss gets directions from the man and continues to Harlan Atwater's house, where she meets "a short, fat Indian man" about fifty or sixty years old. He admits that he published the book of poems under a pseudonym thirty years earlier and tells her he has no copies of his book. She cries, and they go to a used bookstore to talk. Harlan tells Corliss that although technically he's a Spokane Indian, a white family in Seattle raised him and that he wrote poetry to find his true Indian identity. In a flashback to 1973, Harlan Atwater reads from his self-published book of poems at a Seattle bookstore, meets a white hippie girl, goes home with her and makes love to her. He

laughs when he realizes that she gets a sexual thrill out of giving herself to an Indian as a kind of atonement for hundreds of years of injustice by whites, then leaves and takes a box of his poetry books to an Indian bar. There, he autographs 275 books and gives them out to other Indians, gets drunk and wakes up next morning in an alley behind the bar where his books are littered all over the ground. He leaves his books and goes home.

Harlan tells Corliss he never wrote another poem after that experience and has worked menial jobs and lived with his white adoptive parents since. Harlan tells her he once tracked down his real mother, who was living in a crack house in Los Angeles, saw her on the street and knew it was his mother although she did not recognize him. He says he feels lucky that he wasn't raised by his mother, but he wonders what kind of Indian that makes him. When Corliss asks him his real name, Harlan just smiles enigmatically and walks out of the bookstore.

"The Search Engine" Analysis

"The Search Engine" powerfully presents the dilemma of Native Americans who seek their true identity in contemporary American society. College student Corliss Joseph is ambivalent about her Spokane Indian origins. She loves and respects her parents, who have great hopes for her, but she feels somehow trapped by their parochial mindset and even her own attempts to write poetry. Part of her ambivalence stems from the obvious disdain that her tribal relatives have for poetry, but another part relates to her own feelings about non-Indian writers.

Although Corliss admires poets like W.H. Auden, she becomes intrigued by *In the Reservation of My Mind,* a small book of poetry by someone called Harlan Atwater, an ostensible Spokane Indian like herself. Her interest stems from the fact his poems, like hers, reveal a struggle for a true Indian identity. When Corliss' mother says she can't recall anyone with that name from the Spokane Indian Reservation, Corliss sets out on a personal "vision quest" to find the poet, which is symbolic of any poet who seeks his or her artistic identity and voice, but particularly for this young Indian poet. Corliss is "contradictory and young and confused and smart and unformed and ambitious. How could she tell her father and uncles she read [G.M.] Hopkins precisely because he was a white man and precisely because he was a Jesuit priest?"

When Corliss finally contacts Harlan Atwater by telephone, he seems the sad epitome of the Native American whose low self-esteem has eroded his personality to the point where there's nothing left but paranoia - the ultimate fruit of colonialism. Corliss' encounter with a homeless, white, former economics professor serves to underline the fragility of the human condition, irrespective of race or color. The man serves as a reminder of the emptiness of the world's labels concerning status and prestige, because his downfall was presaged by a psychotic (or inspired?) episode in which he demanded respect. When Corliss meets Harlan Atwater, he is less than the heroic figures she'd imagined as "an indigenous version of Harrison Ford. She'd wanted Indiana Jones and found Seattle Atwater."

When Corliss hears Harlan's story, she is saddened by the fact that he stopped writing poetry. She's also distressed by the fact that his short-lived triumph, which included having sex with a white hippie girl, was fake because she didn't care about Harlan - only about using him as a totem to atone for centuries of abuse of Indians by whites. At the conclusion of this bitter story, Corliss has learned everything about Harlan Atwater except his real name. One is left to ponder whether she will pursue her own individual artistic and personal identity or abandon the attempt, as did the mysterious poet.

"Lawyer's League"

"Lawyer's League" Summary

Richard, the narrator, describes himself as "a graceful monster," the son of an African American giant football player and a Spokane Indian ballerina dance major at the University of Washington. "I'm a biracial revolutionary leftist magician with a twenty-foot jumper encoded in my DNA," he says. As executive liaison to twenty-nine Indian tribes in Washington State for the governor, he's learned that many so-called tribal leaders are illiterate and confesses that his ambition is to be elected to the Senate and then run for president.

At a political dinner party in Seattle, Richard meets a group of Republican and Democratic lawyer/lobbyists, including one woman, Teresa, with whom he discovers a rapport that leads him to think he could take her home, sleep with her and abandon her. Instead, he chooses not do get involved with her for political - not personal - reasons. After Teresa goes to Paris, Richard is invited to play basketball with a group of lawyers that includes some of the people from the dinner party. At his first game, Richard learns from his friend Steve that most of the lawyers are public defenders, with the exception of Big Bill, a prosecutor. Every time Richard makes a basket, Big Bill protests that he broke "the rules," until the other lawyers get so frustrated that Richard's friend Steve suggests he go home and come back another time.

When Big Bill says: "Yeah, that's right, kid. Go home," Richard becomes incensed and hits him, causing Big Bill to hit the floor bloody and with a broken nose. As Richard goes home, laughing, he realizes that he's just punched one lawyer in the presence of six others, and he envisions lawsuits, jail time and a criminal record. Richard's mind starts to invent excuses and rationales for what he did, when he realizes that the incident could also harm his political ambitions. Richard settles the matter civilly out of court, but then he twists the story so that he can turn it to his own political advantage, if it ever comes up. "Of course I broke his nose. What else was I supposed to do? He was a racist. If you elect me as your next senator from Washington State, I'll punch every racist in the nose."

"Lawyer's League" Analysis

Richard appears to be a deeply conflicted man because of his mixed-race background, his intelligence and his political ambitions. Obsessed with realizing his full potential, Richard tries to orchestrate his every move in life to reach his goal of becoming a U.S. senator and then president. His ambition leads him to work for the Washington State governor's office and to choose his friends carefully. Even his social and recreational encounters reflect his political focus.

At a political dinner in Seattle, Richard runs into a charming and seductive white woman with whom he feels he could be intimate. He politely turns her away after he intellectualizes that it would be too difficult for a half-black, half-Indian candidate to kiss his white wife in public. Even though the two have never gone on a date, Richard rules her out of his life in order to protect his ambition. The reader wonders whether he has cut off his nose to spite his face since he seems to have a genuine feeling for her. The story ends with a series of rationalizations by Richard on everything from hitting Bill to dumping Teresa. Richard seems to have become a prisoner of his own ambitions, painfully aware that he must suppress important parts of his humanity and even his Indian identity to achieve political success.

"Can I Get a Witness?"

"Can I Get a Witness?" Summary

A fifty-year-old Spokane Indian woman who is a paralegal for a Seattle civil rights law firm is finishing her lunch in a local restaurant when a Syrian-American man enters and detonates a bomb that kills forty-two and injures thirty-seven people. As she struggles to extricate herself from the wreckage of the blast, after being knocked unconscious, a middle aged white man approaches and tries to help her. The man takes her by the hand and leads her away from the scene and then asks if he can take her home. Still dazed and off-center, she asks him to take her to his home.

The man imagines that the Indian woman might be a terrorist because of her dark hair and brown skin. He also imagines having sex with her. In his apartment at Pioneer Square, he gives her a glass of water, and they discuss their families. She tells him that she hates her husband and has twin sixteen-year-old sons who drive her crazy with their masculine energy and noise. The man and woman - who remain anonymous throughout the entire story - finally relax and laugh about the absurdity of having sex in the wake of such a traumatic event. She has a seizure, and when she comes out of it, he tries to call 911 but instead reaches a pizza restaurant. In an absurd exchange with the teenager at the restaurant, the man tells him to make dozens of pizzas and give them to people in the streets to become a "hero."

The woman ponders her unhappy marriage and wonders how she can go back to her family. She laughs at the man's jokes, and he acknowledges that his misplaced sense of humor had so irritated his former wife that she called him "Mr. Funny" before eventually divorcing him. He tells her that he stands to make tens of millions of dollars on a computer game he designed based on the September 11 terrorist attacks. She recalls the day of those attacks and the fear that went through people in high-rise buildings in Seattle, and she asks him how many people who died in the World Trade Towers might have deserved it.

"How many of those guys were cheating on their wives? A few hundred, probably. How many of them were beating their kids? One hundred more, right? Don't you think one of those bastards was raping his kids?" The man recoils and tells her that she needs to go to the hospital. The woman continues on her rant against everything that bothers her - including the fact that her husband, a former "powwow fancydancer," talked his two sons into joining the Marines upon graduation from high school. The woman weeps and tells the man that ever since the September 11 attacks, she's prayed that she'd be killed in a bombing.

When the woman realizes that she had survived the Seattle bombing, she was happy because she could walk away from her old life. Appalled, the man vomits with disgust. The woman asks him to take her to the hospital, and he carries her in his arms, filled

with a desire to give her some kind of transformational love. They part as they came together, tentatively, anonymously, sadly.

"Can I Get a Witness?" Analysis

Change - explosive change - manifests itself in the lives of the two central characters as they struggle to deal with their fears and disappointments. The bombing of a Seattle restaurant shakes a middle-aged Native American woman into the realization that she needs to make some changes in her personal life, which has become a lifeless routine. The shattering experience that the nameless man and woman experience strips the veneer of civility off everyday life and brings some ugly realities into view.

For example, the Indian woman wonders the issue of justice related to the World Trade Center attacks when she considers that some of the people killed were probably monsters. Brought together by the bombing, the two strangers try to relate to each other beyond their shock and fears. The man thinks the Native American woman is attractive and wonders whether he might have sex when he brings her to his apartment, but at the same time, when he first sees her dark hair and skin, he wonders if she might be a terrorist. The man approaches the woman with both fear and attraction, the emotions that many of us struggle with when trying to establish intimacy. The woman finds the man amusing but has no interest in sex; in fact, she says she has hoped ever since the September 11 attacks that she would either be killed or could simply disappear after a terrorist attack and begin a new life.

The two do their own fancy dance around any kind of intimacy as each struggles to overcome the loneliness that defines their lives. These two people represent the aspirations and frustrations of average Americans, as they seek to carry on in their lives as best they can despite heartbreak and disappointment. The woman seems to believe there is no good in other people, but the man wants to give her some kind of divine love of which he is incapable. In the end, the story describes the existentialist dilemma of all people in our modern world.

"Do Not Go Gentle"

"Do Not Go Gentle" Summary

The unnamed narrator of this very short story tells a humorous tale with an ironic twist about how a dildo - combined with Indian songs, chants and prayers - brings his infant son out of a coma at Children's Hospital in Seattle. He describes how his son gets stuck between his mattress and crib and "suffocated himself blue." The boy falls into a coma, dies three times and is revived three times with the use of very expensive medical equipment that keeps "Mr. Grief" away.

Afraid to become too hopeful about the baby, the Indian narrator and his Indian wife don't choose a name because "hope eats your flesh like a spider bite." The narrator thinks he sees Mr. Grief behind his wife's eyes and yells at her. His wife believes she encounters Mr. Grief in the corridors of the hospital and attacks him "like she was Muhammad Ali." While passed out from exhaustion in the bathroom, the narrator becomes aware of two men discussing their sick children and decides to go shopping for baby toys. He goes into a store called Toys in Babeland, thinking it's a baby supply store, only to discover that it sells sex toys and paraphernalia. He encounters a vibrator called Chocolate Thunder which is "dark brown and 15 inches long and needed a nine-volt battery."

The narrator buys the dildo, runs to the fourth-floor ICU and waves Chocolate Thunder in the air like some kind of magic wand. He runs around the unit waving Chocolate Thunder over his son and over other babies, laughing and hooting, and soon other parents also are laughing and hooting. Then his wife takes Chocolate Thunder and uses it to pound her Indian tribal drum, and she sings an Indian song to the accompaniment of the buzzing dildo. The song echoes up and down the hallways and is heard by everyone - a kind of "healing duet." For the next two weeks, the narrator's wife sings and prays over their son with the vibrator in her hands. The child responds, opens his eyes and is finally sent home. The parents name him Abraham and hang Chocolate Thunder over his crib like a magic mobile talisman.

"Do Not Go Gentle" Analysis

The rational, scientific world of medicine and western healing is juxtaposed with the shamanic, tribal customs of Native Americans with sometimes hilarious, sometimes poignant effect. As the narrator and his wife face "Mr. Grief" when their infant son nearly suffocates in his crib, they invoke ancient tribal customs of drumming, chanting and prayer while the child is hooked up to an expensive, high-tech life support system in the hospital.

After about a week of this routine, as the parents fall into a state of exhaustion, the narrator father goes looking for a toy in Seattle and mistakenly ends up in a sex toy

shop where he buys a huge vibrating dildo, "Chocolate Thunder." When he brings the dildo back to the hospital, the parents use it, with much hilarity, as another part of their Indian ritual - beating drums with it and waving it in the air. When their son recovers, they place the dildo over his crib at home. The reader wonders whether the irrational, spiritual, playful aspects of folk medicine aren't just as powerful as modern technology in healing and preserving life. The incantations of the Indian parents with the Chocolate Thunder as a symbol of sex and reproduction and life seem to suggest the deep-rooted power of this tribal approach to healing.

"Flight Patterns"

"Flight Patterns" Summary

Native American traveling salesman William rolls out of bed early one morning when he's supposed to get to the Seattle airport for a business trip to Chicago. His wife, Marie, a longhaired Spokane Indian woman, tries to get him to cancel his flight and stay home with her and their five-year-old daughter, Grace. There is a gentle, heart-warming tug-of-war between them before he finally gets underway.

William admits that he's afraid of flying. He "always scanned the airports and airplanes for little brown guys who reeked of fundamentalism." William also is a little brown guy, though, who goes to great pains to smell only of soap and after-shave. William's cab driver is a short, thin black man from Ethiopia. As they drive to the airport down Martin Luther King, Jr. Way in Seattle, William reflects that "Seattle might be the only city in the country where white people lived comfortably on a street named after Martin Luther King." As he readies himself for his flight, William realizes the depth of his feelings for his family and how much he misses them whenever he travels. The cab driver, Fekadu, tells William that he hasn't seen his wife and three sons in Ethiopia for five years, that he's an Oxford-educated physicist and a pilot who could fly everything from prop planes to passenger jets to experimental craft.

William and Fekadu discuss their physical appearances, skin color and social status. William says he's often asked by Muslim cab drivers whether he's Jewish, or perhaps a longhaired Mexican. Fekadu says everyone assumes he's an African American. "Because people think I'm black, they don't see me as a terrorist, only as a crack-head addict on welfare," he laughs. Fekadu says he dropped bombs on his own people for Emperor Haile Selassie in Ethiopia before he stole an airplane and defected by flying to France in 1974. When Fekadu drops him off at the airport, William is seized with fear and leaves his bags on the curb to run inside to a pay phone. He calls his house to check on his wife and daughter. Marie answers, and he is reassured.

"Flight Patterns" Analysis

Pacifism and its roots in the desire to preserve one's family find expression in this story. William's greatest desire is to simply be able to spend time at home with his family, although he must spend a great deal of time traveling for his job as a salesman. His cab driver defected from his country, where he was forced to bomb his own people, even though it meant abandoning his family in Ethiopia. He still sends his family money wrapped in packages after five years, but he wonders is any of it actually reaches them. Both men feel the pain of loss and the absurdity of being stereotyped because of their skin color. William - himself a little brown man - finds himself looking at airports for little brown men who might be dangerous Muslim terrorists. Fekadu answers questions about whether he's an American black from the East Coast or West Coast by saying,

"Ivory Coast." The two men discover their common humanity and their insider/outsider status in American society, which causes them both pain and humorous experiences they can share.

"The Life and Times of Estelle Walks Above"

"The Life and Times of Estelle Walks Above" Summary

A humorous and quirky look at the challenges of growing up as a Native American youth with a strong-willed, eccentric, intelligent Spokane Indian mother who is single, this piece defies the standard short story form yet delivers plenty of sarcasm, wit and compassion. The narrator describes himself as a "pretty-skinny-beautiful" boy who lives with his mother, Estelle, in a rented house in the Ballard section of Seattle where they survive frugally on fruits and vegetables. "I wasn't a vegetarian by choice; I was a vegetarian by economic circumstances." The narrator describes his mother as "super smart" and an assistant to a University of Washington professor who is given to loud public comments at any display of rudeness.

Estelle is described as an early and ardent feminist, but hardly the lesbian some suspect. She gives her son frank sexual advice and tries to "negotiate" whenever he expresses anger or other normal emotions. Her quest to become a "progressive and whole woman" means that she drags her thirteen-year-old son to all the New Age seminars, workshops and discussions with her. The narrator describes his discomfort in those all-female venues, especially his service as custodian-cum-caterer for their meetings. "I was 13 and should have been running the streets with other 13-year-old boys." When one of her friends asks his mother was Estelle Walks Above means, she nervously says it means, "I walk above...*stuff*" She made up the Indian-sounding name, although her surname is Miller.

The narrator confesses to a love/hate relationship with his mother that borders on the Oedipal. He describes coming home early from school on afternoon to see twelve women examining their vaginas with hand-held mirrors. The narrator is engaged to a liberal white woman when he meets and begins an affair with a Crow Indian woman that will later lead to marriage. On the night of his high school graduation, the narrator's mother gives him four rules for a happy marriage: 1) Wash the dishes; 2) If you're lonely, do the laundry; 3) Vacuum and 4) Reverse the stereotypical gender roles.

Both mother and son become community college teachers - the son at North Seattle Community College and Estelle at Seattle Central Community College. In the final scene, the narrator and his mother drive the crowded streets of Seattle on a sunny, busy day. The narrator spots an athletic, tall, beautiful blond woman in a white dress crossing the street. As she crosses, he notices dried menstrual blood on her dress and calls to his mother, who responds: "I know, I know!" As they watch, an older woman stops her car, gets out and walks the woman in the white dress to safety. Estelle and her son stop their car and weep together.

"The Life and Times of Estelle Walks Above" Analysis

The narrator's cry for a father and for male sustenance and companionship becomes a love song to his mother. He describes at length his frustrations of being the con of a liberated, single Indian woman in the mid-70s with the ubiquitous feminist consciousness raising groups. The thirteen-year-old boy at one point becomes nothing more than a house servant for his mother, when he realizes he should be roaming the streets with his peers. Then he wonders if perhaps he's a latent homosexual or caught in some Oedipal web with his mother. The clarity with which he poses the questions provides a good indication that he will survive the feminization of his boyhood and emerge a man.

Consider: "I like being Indian. I love the way Indian men often wear their hair long, cry too easily, wear florid clothes - all reds and pinks and lavenders and turquoises - and sing and dance most every day of their lives. Indian men are probably the most feminized males on the planet (and I mean that as a compliment) despite how ridiculously macho we pretend to be." The narrator also confesses to a liking for liberal white people, despite the history of white-Indian relations in the United States. There is a strong note of ambivalence and irony in the story, as evidenced by the narrator's relationship with his mother, the dominant white culture and other Indians.

"Do You Know Where I Am?"

"Do You Know Where I Am?" Summary

David, the narrator, meets and falls in love with Sharon - another Native American - at the first social mixer of their freshman year at a Catholic college in Seattle. As the only Native American Catholics for miles around, the two figure that they were destined for each other. David has a white mother who is a corporate attorney and a Spokane Indian father named Marvin who died when David was a baby. Both David and Sharon went to private schools, became National Merit Scholars and are in the English honors department in college. They frequently quote literary classics to each other and sometimes sneak into each other's dormitory rooms to make love despite the possibility of expulsion for "moral violations."

One day while walking by a creek on campus, David and Sharon hear a cat crying in the bushes. David climbs down an embankment to rescue the cat, and Sharon recalls a newspaper ad placed by someone who lost a cat. She calls the owner, and they jog off to their house with the cat in hand. David embellishes their story a bit when they meet the cat's owners, an elderly couple, and he says that he remembered their newspaper ad. They thank him and give him $20. Later Sharon tells David she's disgusted with his lie and acceptance of the money. On graduation day, Sharon has disappeared and doesn't reappear until a month later. His mother explains that Apache Indians often disappear after major events. Sharon reappears, and the two marry, have four children and live happily in Seattle. After ten years of marriage, Sharon confesses to David that she's had an extramarital affair that is over. She promises to answer three questions about the affair and then will not discuss it anymore.

Sharon tells David the man's name and where and how they made love. Devastated, David clutches Sharon on the couch for four hours until their kids come home from school, and then they dance and play games with the children, have dinner and read them stories before putting them to sleep. For his fortieth birthday, Sharon gives David a T-shirt that says on the front "Lost Cat" and on the back "Do You Know Where I Am?" One year after the couple celebrates Sharon's sixty-sixth birthday, she is dying of cancer and tells David that he's a liar, smiling. He replies that he lied to her once, but only once. "Is that the truth?" she asks. "Yes," he answers.

"Do You Know Where I Am?" Analysis

The powerfully corrosive force of lies and dishonesty in marriage - or any relationship - is the key message of this story. David and Sharon seem perfectly matched for each other, with similar interests, backgrounds and value systems. In the early stages of their relationship, a minor distortion of the truth by David angers Sharon and causes her to disappear for a month. Her faith in him has been shaken, but because their love is still alive, they reunite and are married. Even if Sharon hasn't forgiven David, her anger has

softened, and the episode with the lost cat that gave rise to his dishonesty becomes the subject of a longstanding joke. After a decade of marriage and four children, Sharon confesses to David that she's had an affair.

At first angry, hurt and spiteful, David learns more about her indiscretion and is evidently able to accept it if not forgive. Their lives and marriage go forward. Their children grow up to have good lives and remain close to their parents. The compromises they make with each other and with themselves enable them to experience the compensations of a long and mostly happy marriage. David, as narrator, suggests that forgiveness, acceptance and steadfastness count as much as love in having a long and happy marriage. Human beings will always fail and be less than perfect or less than our expectations on occasion, but the ability to accept each other's brokenness in a marriage is as sustaining as the love that draws a couple together initially.

"What You Pawn, I Will Redeem"

"What You Pawn, I Will Redeem" Summary

Jackson, the narrator, is a Spokane Indian who lives on the streets of Seattle. He hangs out with his friends Rose of Sharon and Junior. One day after panhandling enough money to buy a bottle of wine, they head toward the liquor store and stop briefly at a pawn shop window. Jackson swears that the powwow dance regalia in the window belonged to his grandmother before it was stolen fifty years previously. He goes inside with his friends to see if he can positively identify the regalia and learn its sales price. Jackson knows that each Indian family has its own secret way of marking regalia. He knows that if there is a yellow bead somewhere on the regalia, it was his grandmother's.

The pawnbroker tells Jackson and his friends the price for the regalia is $1,000, but Jackson tells him he doesn't have the money. The piece has been missing from his family for more than fifty years. The pawnbroker says he'll sell it to him for $999 if Jackson comes back with the money within twenty-four hours. The three Indians take their total cash ($20) to a nearby liquor store and get drunk. When Jackson awakens, he sees that Rose of Sharon is gone and Junior is passed out beside him in an alley. Jackson tries to get more than 1,400 copies of Spare Change, a homeless newspaper sold on the streets, to sell so that he can raise the money. Unable to buy the papers, he is fortunate to be given fifty free copies to sell. He sells five papers in an hour, dumps the rest and takes his money to buy cheeseburgers. Jackson uses his last dollar to buy a lottery ticket, wins $100 and gives the cashier $20.

Jackson goes to tell Junior about his good news, but he finds Junior gone. Then Jackson goes to an Indian bar, buys everyone drinks and passes out drunk. He encounters a friendly cop who loans him $30 for the regalia, then spends $25 buying breakfast for some fellow Indians. When he returns to the pawnshop, he throws the $5 bill on the counter expecting to be thrown out. The pawnbroker decides to give him the regalia, though, and Jackson walks away feeling proud and happy. Jackson puts on his grandmother's regalia and dances in the streets, as cars and pedestrians stop and watch.

"What You Pawn, I Will Redeem" Analysis

This story captures much of the randomness, heartbreak and futility of alcoholic street people - with an added element of pathos that attends Native American homeless alcoholics. Beginning with Jackson's sighting of what he believes is his grandmother's tribal regalia in a pawnshop window, the reader goes on a topsy-turvy expedition of good luck followed by bad luck followed by drunkenness followed by good luck. The cyclical nature of these exploits and the self-defeating behavior of Jackson furnish a very real sense of the dead-end life of the homeless. Ironically, as Jackson the Spokane Indian tries to raise the money to buy back the family regalia that probably ended up in

the pawnshop through some kind of betrayal by a white person, he is most assisted by white people.

A white person sells him and cashes a $100 lottery ticket, a white policeman gives him $30, and a sympathetic white pawnbroker finally gives him the regalia. Jackson's dealing with his fellow Indians, on the other hand, always seem to end up in drunkenness, insanity and futility. The story raises the question of the extent to which Native Americans in today's world are victimized by the white majority culture and by comparison by their own beliefs and behavior patterns. In the end, the narrator seems to feel vindicated of the loss of the regalia by the kindness of white people who go out of their way to help him.

The author's insertion of times from noon one day to noon the next give it a sense of stark realism as Jackson races to meet a deadline set by the pawnbroker for purchase of the regalia. This device helps to compound the narrative tension until the final resolution.

"What Ever Happened to Frank Snake Church?"

"What Ever Happened to Frank Snake Church?" Summary

Frank Snake Church is a thirty-nine-year-old Spokane Indian forest ranger on Mount Rainier near Seattle who thinks he's been struck by lightning one day but discovers it's a "vision" telling him that his father has died. He jumps into his truck and drives at breakneck speed to Seattle's Central District and the home he shares with his father, Harrison. As he drives, he recalls all his years of growing up with his father and mother, and especially the years they've spent together since his mother Helen died. When he reaches the house, he finds his father sitting at the kitchen table eating cereal and drinking coffee.

Almost exactly a year later, though, Frank's father dies, and after the funeral Frank returns home, gathers up pieces of his father's hair into a ball and eats it. He prays: "Come back, Daddy. Come back, Daddy" ad infinitum, howls, weeps, sleeps and howls some more. Frank decides to organize his life and to visit a personal trainer to get back into shape and to be able to play basketball once again as he'd done in high school. Frank starts to play basketball again when he isn't working with his personal trainer, driving around Seattle in search of pickup games. Frank gets a whiff of a Kentucky Fried Chicken, which sets off a train of memories of times when he went on trips with his parents that inevitably included basketball with his father. On one of those trips, he learns that his mother also played basketball when she was younger. His mother takes him on the court and shows him some of her skills. Mother, father and son join in playing basketball until after dark.

In a later basketball game with Preacher - a middle-aged black man - Preacher recalls the great Frank Snake Church of 1979 and wonders: "What Ever Happened to Frank Snake Church?" Frank tells him that he is the same person, but Preacher doesn't believe him. Frank tells him he's taken up basketball again to honor his parents, and Preacher laughs. Frank then enrolls in West Seattle Community College and tries to join the basketball team. The coach lets him go to some workouts with the players, and Frank does well until he's felled by knee pain. When he's on the floor, he beats it like a drum while chanting honor songs to his parents. The players support and encourage him while referring to him as "old man," and it's clear that Frank has had a short-term victory even if he can't join the team.

"What Ever Happened to Frank Snake Church?" Analysis

Frank Snake Church becomes the embodiment of the power of Indian tribal customs, despite his assimilation into the white world that surrounds him in Seattle. When his father dies of a heart attack, Frank decides to get into shape and play basketball as he once did in his youth. It's a personal quest for better health but also a way to honor his parents, who both played basketball with him as a child. Braving the pain and hardships that face him at the age of forty, as well as the incredulity and even ridicule of younger players, Frank plays basketball with anyone he can find. He eventually enrolls in a community college so that he can play on the school basketball team. He works hard, plays hard and injures himself, but Frank wins the respect of his undergraduate team members. He also succeeds at honoring the memory of his parents so that the quest for basketball excellence becomes a sort of modern day way of revering his parents, in the old Indian custom.

Characters

Corliss Joseph in "The Search Engine"

A nineteen-year-old student at Washington State University from Spokane, Corliss is a Spokane Indian who is "very short, a few inches under five feet, maybe 30 pounds overweight, and plain-featured. But her skin was clear and dark brown (like good coffee!) and her long black hair hung down past her waist." Loved and supported by her mother and uncles, Corliss is nevertheless misunderstood because of her desire to become a writer. Corliss is bright and motivated to discover her identity as a Native American and as a poet. Her artistic quest becomes a personal quest for the elusive Indian poet Harlan Atwater, whose work she discovers by accident one day in the campus library. When she finally tracks him down in Seattle, she is shocked and disappointed to discover that he is an ordinary person, like her. The primary difference is that Harlan Atwater has abandoned his dreams, while she continues to seek hers.

Harlan Atwater in "The Search Engine"

The author of a promising book of self-published poetry from the 70s, Harlan Atwater has been consigned to the dustbin of history and to the dusty shelves of the poetry section of the WSU library when his book almost falls into Corliss Joseph's lap one day. His poetry seems to combine Spokane Indian tribalism and spirituality in a modern, existentialist style that is unique and compelling. When Corliss seeks out the mysterious poet, she is frustrated by lack of information, abruptly ended telephone calls and outright resistance on the part of Atwater, whom she finally meets in Seattle. Atwater is a dark-skinned Indian who also looks "pasty, like a chocolate doughnut. Corliss was angry with him for being homely." He admits to Corliss that he hasn't written a poem in thirty years because to do so would only remind him of his limitations and cause pain. When Corliss asks him for his "real Indian name," he gets up and walks away.

Richard in "Lawyer's League"

A sort of Indian yuppie with political aspirations, Richard describes himself as the son of a radical black basketball player and a Spokane Indian ballerina. His mixed racial background and political ambitions make him thin-skinned to the point of paranoia. At a dinner for lobbyists and politicians in Seattle, Richard is on thin ice when he comments on the marriage of a Republican husband and Democrat wife. The wife becomes sexually interested in Richard, and he is also captivated. He doesn't pursue her, though, because of his overriding political ambition. He plays basketball with a bunch of leftist lawyers who seem to like him, but he tangles with one lawyer, "Big Bill," who is a prosecutor and perhaps a closet racist. Richard punches him in the nose after an exchange of heated words and then worries about how the episode might affect his political career. "At night, I lie in bed with my ambition, close my eyes, and imagine the

inevitable press conference" where he'd have to explain why he hit Big Bill. The two settle their differences in a civil action, and Richard's path remains clear, although his mind is clouded with the continual formulation of cover-ups, lies and obfuscations.

Bombing Victim in "Can I Get A Witness?"

The central character of this post-September 11 tale is an anonymous fifty-year-old Spokane Indian woman who works as a paralegal in a Seattle law firm. She's a college-educated woman who earns $10 an hour, "a laboratory mouse lost in the capitalistic maze." The reader learns that she doesn't like her job, her husband or her two sons and has secretly wished and prayed for some disaster that would permit her to disappear and start a new life. That disaster occurs in the form of a domestic terrorist bombing which she survives. In the company of a middle-aged white man who takes her to his Seattle apartment after the blast, she confronts the absurdity and meaninglessness of life in general and her life in particular. The reader wonders whether this woman will now have the courage to change her life that she lacked before the bombing.

The Narrator in "Do Not Go Gentle"

Although never identified by name or ethnicity, the reader knows that the narrator is an American Indian by clues within the story, such as references to hand drums, honor songs and the nasty, diminutive Mr. Grief who lurks outside his newborn son's room at Children's Hospital, where the infant lies in a coma. When the narrator buys a brown dildo known as Chocolate Thunder, it becomes a healing totem for his son, as he and his wife wave it over their child. The narrator is filled with joy and gratitude for Chocolate Thunder having dispatched Mr. Grief and saved his son's life.

William in "Flight Patterns"

A Spokane Indian who flies frequently in his job as a business consultant, William loves his wife Marie and children dearly and hates to leave them. He's also a fitness freak and "diagnostically speaking, William was an obsessive-compulsive workaholic who was afraid of pills. So he suffered sleepless nights and constant daytime fatigue." His life is also made more difficult by the fact that, whenever he travels, people eye him suspiciously in airports because of his dark looks.

Fekadu in "Flight Patterns"

Another dark-skinned person with an ambivalent social status, Fekadu is the Ethiopian cab driver who takes William to the airport. Fekadu is a physicist and former fighter pilot who left his country and family for political reasons. He discovers a bond with William.

Estelle Miller in "The Life and Times of Estelle Walks Above"

Estelle is a Spokane Indian who lives in Seattle and works as an assistant to a professor at the University of Washington. She's an early feminist, raising her son (the narrator) as a single parent. "My mother was napve and vengeful, just like Napoleon, Alexander the Great, Joan of Arc and about 99 percent of all the famous world leaders you ever heard about." Estelle has a loud and brash mouth and is given to vocal, public shaming of people who she considers rude or offensive. She likes to answer others' question with questions because she believes it makes her sound Zen.

David in "Do You Know Where I Am?"

As narrator, David relates the story of his love for and marriage to Sharon - both Native Americans and outstanding college students when they first meet. Honesty is very important to both of them, and Sharon is at first disappointed then accepts David's white lie about how he rescued a lost kitten that belongs to an elderly couple who give him money. They marry, and later she has an affair, which rends David's heart. He also accepts her infidelity, though. When she's dying at the age of sixty-seven from cancer, he's able to tell her honestly that he's never lied to her except for the one occasion involving the kitten.

Sharon in "Do You Know Where I Am?"

An Apache Indian, Sharon is drawn to David the Spokane Indian but offended when he tells a half-truth. She disappears for a month in customary Apache style, but she rejoins him and becomes his wife. Throughout their marriage, she teases him about his slight dishonesty but confesses a much larger indiscretion of her own. The reader sees how these two strong individuals overcome their disappointments and maintain their love, Indian-style.

Jackson Jackson in "What You Pawn I Will Redeem"

Another Spokane Indian, Jackson is a homeless drunk in Seattle who travels with his two Indian partners - Rose of Sharon and Junior. Jackson feels a very strong sense of kinship and tribe with other Indians, so much so that he'll share his last dollar with another Indian who's hungry or wants to get drunk. The characters of Jackson and his friends bring to mind the happy-go-lucky inebriates of John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row,* but with a tragic undertone because of their victimization as Indians. Jackson's Keystone Kops-style efforts to raise the money to buy his grandmother's stolen regalia illustrate both his sympathetic camaraderie with other Indians, as well as the insanity of his disease of alcoholism. Ultimately, though, it is through the kindness of several white

people that he is able to retrieve the tribal regalia that means so much to him. Jackson then realizes there are many good people in the world of all races.

Frank Snake Church in "What Ever Happened to Frank Snake Church?"

A thirty-nine-year-old forest ranger, Frank Snake Church is a former high school basketball star who decides to get into shape and play basketball again as a way of honoring his parents - who both also played basketball. Also a Spokane Indian, Frank seems to have a different sense of time and context than those in the mainstream. For example, he has a "vision" of his father's death, but his father doesn't die for another year. His grief expresses itself in bizarre rituals such as eating his father's hair. His focus on honoring his parents becomes an obsession that leads him back to college as a member of the basketball team, where he earns the respect of his coach and fellow players.

Preacher in "What Ever Happened to Frank Snake Church?"

A middle-aged black man, who is a friend and basketball court mate of Frank, Preacher gently urges and cajoles him into becoming a better player. Preacher teases him that he's not the same Frank Snake Church who he saw wiping up the basketball court in high school, and he angers Frank enough to try to get on the community college basketball team.

Objects/Places

Seattle

Seattle, Washington is the location for all of the stories. Although the Spokane Indian Reservation is often mentioned, the action usually involves Spokane Indians in the greater Seattle area.

Chocolate Thunder

Chocolate Thunder is the name of a vibrating dildo purchased by the father of a boy in a coma in "Do Not Go Gentle." The dildo becomes a kind of talisman to bring the child back to health.

Indian Dance Regalia

In "What You Pawn, I will Redeem" Spokane Indian Jackson Jackson notices his grandmother's tribal regalia - stolen fifty years earlier - in a Seattle pawnshop window.

Basketball

Basketballs and the game itself figure prominently in two stories, "Lawyer's League" and "What Ever Happened to Frank Snake Church?"

Themes

Self-Esteem

Running throughout this collection of stories is the central issue of self-esteem. Corliss Joseph has it, but her parents and relatives on the Spokane Indian Reservation don't ("The Search Engine"). Corliss has enough self-esteem to live alone at college because she doesn't want a roommate, but her parents' lack of self-esteem is evident in their obsessive desire for her to become "somebody" because of her college education. By that, they mean anything other than the poet she aspires to be. The poets she most admires, like W.H. Auden and Harlan Atwater, seem to have the idealized courage of self-esteem.

When Corliss meets Harlan Atwater, she realizes his self-esteem is practically nonexistent and that his ill-fated and self-published book of poetry was an attempt to gain some self-respect that failed, leaving him a reclusive, embittered old man. As she goes in search of Harlan, Corliss recalls that Indian tribal custom was for young men to go off into the wilderness in search of their own vision of meaning in their life and in the world to answer questions of personal identity and purpose. Without some form of that important tribal ritual, Indians faltered, lost their way and were robbed of their self-esteem, and often their sanity and lives. In meeting a white homeless man bereft of self-esteem, Corliss finds a parallel with Harlan Atwater's mother - a crazed crack addict picking her sores on the streets of Los Angeles.

Corliss realizes that if she were to follow the imprecations of her family to become "somebody" they wanted, she would not be true to herself and would suffer the same fate as the others who'd sacrificed their self-esteem. When Harlan leaves Corliss to return home and care for his beloved white adoptive parents, she realizes that certain basic human traits such as love, devotion, tenderness, creativity and artistic sensibility are not confined to any race or sex or creed. With that awareness, Corliss is able to proceed on her quest with renewed self-esteem.

Self-esteem, or a lack of it, causes Richard to lose control and punch a fellow basketball player in "Lawyer's League," threatening his own political ambitions. The anonymous Spokane Indian woman in "Can I Get A Witness?" suffers from such low self-esteem that she seems powerless to change her life, even after a shattering experience. Jackson is determined to recover his grandmother's tribal regalia in "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" as a way of recovering some self-esteem. In "What Ever Happened to Frank Snake Church," an aging former basketball star is motivated to start playing again as a way to show respect for his parents and raise his own self-esteem.

Disenfranchisement

Parallel with the theme of self-esteem runs the issue of disenfranchisement. Because all of the stories in this collection deal with some aspect of Native American experience, the theme of disenfranchisement is pervasive. In "Search Engine" the young poet Corliss Joseph searches for her own authentic identity as a person and as a writer to overcome her disenfranchisement from the mainstream society. She learns a difficult and painful lesson from an older Indian poet about love and loneliness. In "Lawyer's League," the narrator becomes incensed when he's disenfranchised from a group of after-hours basketball players and suspects that it's a result of racism. "Can I Get a Witness?" describes a terrorist bombing in Seattle by an Arab who acts out of a sense of dis-enfranchisement. The main character in the story also seems a victim of a similar pang from her husband, family and the larger world.

In "Flight Patterns," a Native American and an Ethiopian find they have much in common because of their dark skin and resulting disenfranchisement in America. "The Life and Times of Estelle Walks Above" is a painful but humorous story of adolescence told by an Indian man about his mother, an early women's libber who joins groups of women who feel disenfranchised and seek political power. Homeless, alcoholic Native Americans in "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" are the embodiment of disenfranchisement as they stumble through self-defeating episodes of drunkenness and efforts to retain their dignity. Although the collection of stories presents a fresh, humorous and ironic look at contemporary Native American life, fundamentally the reader is always aware of the profound rejection, poverty and suffering these people still experience.

Tribal Custom versus Modern Life

The Native Americans in this collection of stories are largely ambivalent about tribal customs and rituals. They find some strength and nurturing in those customs, but they also try to adapt to the mainstream white culture. In "The Search Engine," young poet Corliss Joseph can't find anyone in her family who's heard of Harlan Atwater, an alleged Spokane Indian who wrote a book of poetry decades earlier. She also feels stifled by the narrow-minded outlook of her family concerning her literary ambitions. In "Do Not Go Gentle," a young Indian couple uses hand drumming, chanting and prayers to help save their son from a coma at Seattle Children's Hospital - plus a bizarre vibrating dildo that becomes a magic healing wand in a hilarious apotheosis of Indian tribal custom.

In "The Life and Times of Estelle Walks Above," a young Spokane Indian relates the story of growing up with his single, liberated mother in Seattle during the 1970s. He yearns for his father and for some male nurturing of the kind given young men in Native American rituals - something his mother is unable to give him. "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" is a poignant, funny story of a homeless Indian who eventually gets his grandmother's stolen tribal regalia back from a pawn shop as a gesture toward recovery of tribal custom that is crucial to his self-esteem.

Style

Points of View

About half of the stories are told from the point of view of an objective narrator (the author), and the others are told from the point of view of a character in the story. For example, "The Search Engine," "Can I Get A Witness?" and "Flight Patterns" are related by an outside observer. "Lawyer's League," "Do Not Go Gentle," "The Life and Times of Estelle Walks Above," and "Do You Know Where I Am?" are told from the point of view of a character in the story, letting the reader into the characters' minds.

Setting

The setting for all the stories is the greater Seattle area, with occasional references to the Spokane Indian Reservation and Western Washington University. The setting is important as the cultural home of the Spokane Indians, but also as a center of modern American life.

Language and Meaning

The language of these stories is contemporary American English, with a heavy dose of vernacular and slang expressions. The author displays a keen ear for individual variations in speech, as when he uses such words as "enit?" [ain't it?] in the speech of Native Americans.

Structure

The stories are generally in straight chronological order, with an occasional flashback. Variations in this style include the use of times inserted into the story "What You Pawn, I Will Redeem" and lists of ideas or questions in "The Life and Times of Estelle Walks Above."

Quotes

"In the Washington State University library, her version of Sherwood Forest, Corliss walked the poetry stacks. She endured a contentious and passionate relationship with this library. The huge number of books confirmed how much magic she'd been denied for most of her life, and now she hungrily wanted to read every book on every shelf." ("The Search Engine," pg. 5)

"She knew there would come a day when white folks finally understood that Indians are every bit as relentlessly boring, selfish, and smelly as they are and that would be a wonderful day for human rights but a terrible day for Corliss." ("The Search Engine," pg. 11)

"When they were young, some authority figure had told them to pick up a wrench, and so they picked up the wrench and never considered what would happen if they picked up a pencil or a book." ("The Search Engine," pg. 13)

"It was easy to hate white vanity and white rage and white ignorance but what about white compassion and white genius and white poetry?" ("The Search Engine," pg. 14)

"I am tired of surviving the incompetent, the average, the mean and median. I want excellence. I want to be a good man and a great politician who makes promises and keeps them." ("Lawyer's League," pg. 55)

"By and large, lobbyists are as wicked, revenge-minded, poetic, intelligent, candid, and hilarious as any stand-up comedian." ("Lawyer's League," pg. 55)

"Were my eccentric needs as an individual more important than the country's desperate need for excellent leadership? I knew I would never achieve my full potential as a public servant if I married a white woman." ("Lawyer's League," pg. 61)

"This country would be a better place is every U.S. president had punched racists in the face. That would mean U.S. presidents would have spent a lot of time punching themselves in the face." ("Lawyer's League," pg. 68)

"What kind of life had she created for herself? She was a laboratory mouse lost in the capitalist maze. She was an underpaid cow paying one-tenth of the mortgage on a three-bedroom, two-bath abbatoir. And where the hell was her waiter?" ("Can I Get a Witness?" pg. 71)

"His sense of humor had destroyed his marriage. With each joke, he'd punched a hole in his ex-wife's heart. But he couldn't help it. His entire family was hilarious and inappropriate." ("Can I Get a Witness?" pg. 85)

"'Nobody is innocent, right?' she said. 'Isn't that what all of the holy books say? We're all sinners? But after the Trade Center, it was all about the innocent victims. Don't you think

there's a wife out there who thanks God or Allah or the devil for Osama's rage?"' ("Can I Get a Witness?" pg. 92)

"He wanted to love her, and he wanted his love to be bittersweet and irrepressible. He wanted his love to be different than anybody else's. He wanted his love to be the only true image of God." ("Can I Get a Witness?" pg. 95)

"My wife and I didn't even name our baby. We were Indians and didn't want to carry around too much hope. Hope eats your flesh like a spider bite. But my wife and I loved our little Baby X and took turns sitting beside his bed and singing to him." ("Do Not Go Gentle," pg. 97)

"My wife grabbed Chocolate Thunder and used it like a drumstick to pound her hand drum. My wife sang the most beautiful song anybody ever heard in that place. She sang like 10,000 Indian grandmothers rolled into one mother. All the while, Chocolate Thunder sang with her and turned the whole thing into a healing duet." ("Do Not Go Gentle," pg. 100)

"We all like to think each person, place or thing is only itself. A vibrator is a vibrator is a vibrator, right? But that's not true at all. Everything is stuffed to the brim with ideas and love and hope and magic and dreams." ("Do Not Go Gentle," pg. 101)

"He was an Indian who didn't smoke or drink or eat processed sugar. He lifted weights three days a week, ran every day, and competed in four triathlons a year. William was an obsessive-compulsive workaholic who was afraid of pills. So he suffered sleepless nights and constant daytime fatigue." ("Flight Patterns," pg. 103)

"William was equally afraid of Osama bin Laden and Jerry Falwell wearing the last vestiges of a summer tan." ("Flight Patterns," pg. 108)

"Marie was always waiting for William to call, to come home, to leave messages saying he was getting on the plane, getting off the plane, checking into the hotel, going to sleep, waking up, heading for the meeting, catching an earlier or later flight home." ("Flight Patterns," pg. 109)

"William didn't want to insult anybody; he wanted the world to be a fair and decent place. At least that was what he wanted to want. More than anything, he wanted to stay home with his fair and decent family." ("Flight Patterns," pg. 110)

"Perhaps it didn't matter if any one man's stories were true. Fekadu's autobiography might have been completely fabricated, but William was convinced that somewhere in the world, somewhere in Africa or the United States, a man, a jet pilot, wanted to fly away from the war he was supposed to fight." ("Flight Patterns," pg. 121)

"Q: What's the difference between an Indian reservation and a racist, sexist, homophobic, white-trash logging town populated entirely with the mutated children of second cousins? A: The Indians have braids." ("The Life and Times of Estelle Walks Above," pg. 126)

"Where was my father, the bastard, and where was the good man who should have been vainly attempting to take my father's place in my life? I was always hungry for paternity, but during the summer of 1976 a matriarchal woman starved me." ("The Life and Times of Estelle Walks Above," pg. 138)

"They all wanted to become better women, and they have indeed become better at what they do; I have no idea whether they're happy I wouldn't know how to ask that question, and I doubt they'd know how to answer it." ("The Life and Times of Estelle Walks Above," pg. 145)

"My mother and I have loved and failed each other, and we keep on loving and failing each other, and one of us will eventually bury the other, and the survivor will burn down the church with grief's hungry fire." ("The Life and Times of Estelle Walks Above," pg. 149)

"Sharon and I were Native American royalty, the aboriginal prince and princess of western Washington. [We] were in love and happy and young and skinny and beautiful and hyperliterate." ("Do You Know Where I Am," pg. 151)

"Beside the creek. Sharon gently turned the cat over, and we both saw the white heart. Without another word, Sharon ran back to her dorm room and I followed her. She searched for the newspaper in her desk but couldn't find it, and none of her floormates had a copy of the old paper, either, so she ran into the basement and climbed into the Dumpster. I held the cat while she burrowed into the fetid pile of garbage." ("Do You Know Where I Am," pg. 155)

"I never asked to be forgiven, and Sharon never offered her forgiveness." ("Do You Know Where I Am," pg. 159)

"Our contentment was always running only slightly ahead of our dissatisfaction. Was it enough? I don't know. We fought hard for our happiness, and sometimes we won. Over the years, we won often enough to develop a strong taste for winning." ("Do You Know Where I Am," pg. 167)

"One day you have a home and the next you don't, but I'm not going to tell you my particular reasons for being homeless because it's my secret story and Indians have to work hard to keep secrets from hungry white folks." ("What You Pawn I Will Redeem," pg. 169)

"I'm a strong man and I know that silence is the best way of dealing with white folks." ("What You Pawn I Will Redeem," pg. 171)

"With one dollar in my pocket, I walked back to Junior. He was still passed out, so I put my ear to his chest and listened for his heartbeat. He was alive, so I took off his shoes and socks and found one dollar in his left sock and fifty cents in his right sock. With two dollars and fifty cents in my hand, I sat beside Junior and thought about my grandmother and her stories." ("What You Pawn I Will Redeem," pg. 178)

"I emerged from the blackness and discovered myself walking behind a big warehouse. I didn't know where I was. My face hurt. I touched my nose and decided it must be broken. Exhausted and cold, I pulled a plastic tarp from a truck bed, wrapped it around me like a faithful lover, and fell asleep in the dirt." ("What You Pawn I Will Redeem," pg. 185)

"Do you know how many good men live in this world? Too many to count!" ("What You Pawn I Will Redeem," pg. 194)

"How much can one son love one father? Frank loved his father enough to stand and stagger five miles to the logging road where he'd parked his truck. He knew he should get on the radio and call for help. He was exhausted and in no shape to drive. But he also knew that his father was lying dead on the kitchen floor." ("What Ever Happened to Frank Snake Church?" pg. 197)

"Mr. Death, you are a funny-man, but I will not laugh." ("What Ever Happened to Frank Snake Church?" pg. 200)

"He had not yet cried for his father, and he wondered if he would ever cry but his grief grew so suddenly huge that it pushed him to the floor. He lay on the living room carpet and wept huge and gasping tears." ("What Ever Happened to Frank Snake Church?" pg. 203)

"Frank could barely move. His arms and legs burned with pain. His back ached. He figured he'd torn a muscle near his spine. His lungs felt like two sacks of rocks. But he was happy!" ("What Ever Happened to Frank Snake Church?" pg. 242)

Topics for Discussion

How well do the Indians portrayed in this collection of stories adapt to and cope with their lives in contemporary America? Is their ethnicity a help or hindrance?

Identify and discuss the various methods for coping with feelings of anger, powerlessness and disenfranchisement used by the characters in these stories.

Several of the stories are told from the viewpoint of a young man of mixed Indian background growing up with a single mother. What are some of the challenges faced by a person in that situation, as shown in the stories?

What are some of the attitudes displayed by Indians in these stories toward the majority white culture?

The collection is titled "Ten Little Indians," and yet there are only nine stories. Why?

Compare a familiar Indian figure or stereotype (Chief Seattle, Geronimo, Crazy Horse) to any of the Indian characters in these stories. What are the similarities and differences?

The importance of family in Native American culture is evident in many of the stories. Discuss how this compares with the majority white culture of America.