War Dances Study Guide

War Dances by Sherman Alexie

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

NOTE: Citations in this study guide refer to the 2009 Grove Press paperback edition of War Dances by Sherman Alexie.

War Dances is a collection of short stories and poems by Sherman Alexie, most of which focus on Native Americans in contemporary settings, and which deal with themes that include loneliness, unexpected surprises, the influence of history, and so on. In the poem “The Limited,” the narrator wonders why poets always think they can change the world when really all they can change is themselves. In “Breaking and Entering,” George Wilson, an American Indian, uses a baseball bat to kill a black teen that breaks into his house and tries to attack him. George’s action elicits a media firestorm, isolating him from the world. In “Bird-Watching at Night,” the lonely narrator recalls the past when his girlfriend broke up with him for thinking he was an owl.

In the titular story “War Dances,” the Native American narrator suffers from a sudden hearing loss which makes him worry that he has a brain tumor or that his childhood hydrocephalus has returned. Neither turns out to be the case, but during his experiences he recalls his own father’s time in the hospital, during which another Indian family gifted the narrator with a blanket for his father with an Indian song being sung over the blanket to fight off illness. However, the narrator knows that such songs cannot actually heal, but only comfort.

In “Catechism,” the Indian relationship with God is discussed, where the narrator’s mother is a devout believer in God and in bringing the old ways into line with Christianity, while his father is an atheist. In “The Senator’s Son,” the son of a conservative Republican U.S. Senator beats up a gay guy named Jeremy who used to be his best friend simply because Jeremy is gay. Jeremy, himself a conservative Republican, forgives the son, saying his father is the finest senator the state has ever had and that there are more important things in the world to worry about than being beaten up. In “The Ballad of Paul Nonetheless,” Paul twice sees a woman at different airports and attempts to come on to her, but she turns him down both times as she is happily married. Paul believes he and the woman have a connection because he has seen her twice, and Paul believes all people have connections through shared songs. When Paul comes on to a woman who resembles the previous woman and refuses to take her rejection, he is detained by security and begins singing to the guards.

In “On Airplanes,” the narrator comments about how he always gives up his seat so couples may sit near one another. In “Fearful Symmetry,” the screenwriting narrator quits a job when the studio demands too many changes to his script and then enters a crossword competition and loses. On the flight home, the narrator pretends to quickly fill in the crossword in the New York Times to impress a fellow passenger. The narrator realizes he is liar but that all fiction writers are liars, and he longs to return to a more innocent time in his life when he could really write. In the short story “Salt,” the narrator is a temporary obituary writer. He goes to collect obituary materials for a widow only to realize the widow has dementia, lives alone, and is lonely.

“The Limited” – “After Building the Lego Star Wars Ultimate Death Star”

Summary

In the poem titled “The Limited,” an unnamed narrator, driving, watches another man try to hit a stray dog with his car but the man fails. The narrator confronts the other man, but the other man shouts at him not to stare him down unless the narrator is prepared to do something about it. At home, the narrator considers that poets cannot change the world, but that the only life he can save is his own.

In the short story “Breaking and Entering,” George Wilson’s college film professor, Mr. Baron, always tells him to not worry about showing people entering a room, because audiences will understand that people have already entered the room. Wilson bears this piece of advice–to skip the door–in mind for years, explaining that it means to omit any unnecessary information. Wilson always skips the door in the stories he writes and in the films he edits. At present, he is editing a local independent film to reduce sexual exploitation and focus more on romance, as the film is supposed to be a coming-of-age story. As he works, he ignores a knock on the door only to hear window break in his basement a few moments later. With his wife, Wendy, and his son not at home, Wilson grabs his son’s aluminum baseball bat and heads down into the basement. He finds a black teenager who attempts to attack him. Wilson defends himself and hits the teenager in the head, killing him.

The police arrive. The kid is identified as sixteen-year-old Elder Briggs. Wilson is ruled legally innocent, but feels bad about the situation morally. However, the media descends on the situation, and Elder’s mother, Althea, says Elder is just another black boy to be killed by uncaring white men. It is then that Wilson reveals himself to be a member of the Spokane Tribe of Indians. He calls the news to let them know. Eventually, the media firestorm quiets down. Wendy wonders if Wilson lost his temper with Elder rather than defending himself, which in turn causes Wilson to leave to go see a movie. While buying candy before the movie, a group of young black men come in for energy drinks and Wilson worries they will recognize him and harm him; they do not. Driving home later, the same group of men forces Wilson to wait at the crosswalk while they move across the street slowly. Wilson knows he has the power to kill them or harm them with his car, but he does not.

In the poem “Go, Ghost, Go,” the narrator describes a white professor who hates white people and wants whites to suffer as other minority groups have suffered in the past. He wants a new Ghost Dance. The narrator laughs at this, wondering how the professor can call for a Ghost Dance which would require the professor’s own death. The narrator believes the professor wants to be a new Jesus, sacrificing himself because he is addicted to the indigenous.

The narrator of the short story “Bird-Watching at Night” is sixteen and driving through Little Falls Flat with his girlfriend when he decides to play chicken with owls that swoop across the road. For this action, the girlfriend breaks up with him, saying “I’m breaking up with you because you are not an owl” (24). The narrator, decades later, still misses the girl, but realizes he actually misses the owl more.

In the poem “After Building the Lego Star Wars Ultimate Death Star,” the narrator asks his son how many planets the Lego Death Star will destroy. His son explains it is just a toy, and not to worry. The narrator reveals he played war as a young boy and believed it would turn him into a god.

Analysis

Sherman Alexie’s short story and poem collection War Dances draws together twenty-three short stories and poems, all of which relate to one another in some way, shape, or form—primarily through the themes they share and the order in which they are arranged. From the very start of the collection, the thematic idea that life can be very lonely is one such commonality among the stories. In “The Limited,” the narrator, alone, tries to change the world by confronting a man who tries to kill a defenseless dog but comes to realize the only world he can change is his own. “In Breaking and Entering,” George Wilson finds himself very much alone–even alienated from his wife–when the media savages him for killing the black teen that broke into his house and attempted to attack him. In “Bird-Watching at Night,” the narrator feels very much alone in the present, missing the past because it is something he can never get back. The owl the narrator describes symbolizes flight and freedom, something the narrator had in the past and now longs for. This makes his sense of loneliness even worse.

The reader should note that the girlfriend’s action of breaking up with the narrator in “Bird-Watching at Night” is unexpected–and brings to bear the thematic argument Alexie makes repeatedly that life is full of unexpected surprises. Some of these surprises are good, and some are bad. The narrator of “Breaking and Entering” is surprised when a clear-cut case of self-defense becomes a media circus to advance a political point, irrespective of the actual evidence involved in the case. Even the narrator’s own wife doubts him, but his decision not to run over the black kids antagonizing him the end of the novel is a self-affirming experience which convinces the narrator he did not kill the black teen in his basement out of losing his temper. The author writes from a first-person perspective in the poem “Go, Ghost, Go,” in which he expresses surprise to find a white professor who hates white people and wants them to all be killed, including himself. Sherman Alexie also writes from the first-person in the poem “After Building the Lego Star Wars Ultimate Death Star,” in which he is surprised by his son’s maturity and concern when he explains the Lego Death Star is only a toy.

The conversation that the narrator has with his son about the Death Star also lays the groundwork for the theme that history and nostalgia influence life in countless ways. Whereas the narrator’s son knows he is playing with a toy, the narrator’s own childhood adventures made him feel like a god. In “Bird-Watching at Night,” the narrator recalls the

past when his girlfriend broke up with him over his believing he was an owl; this reflection on the past bears tremendous influence on making the narrator feel lonelier in the present. The white professor in “Go, Ghost, Go,” who wants all white people to die, draws on the sins of past generations for his anger and hatred. The narrator of “Breaking and Entering” must continually look back at how a simple case of self-defense has upended his life while worrying about his own safety in the present because of it.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways does loneliness affect the narrators of "The Limited," "Breaking and Entering," and "Bird-Watching at Night"? Why does loneliness affect them in different ways? Is the loneliness they suffer ultimately the same despite different situations? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why is the narrator of "Breaking and Entering" so surprised that the public and the media should turn on him for his act of self-defense? Why does the narrator’s own wife even doubt him? How is the narrator able to prove her wrong?

Discussion Question 3

The past is a very important thing for the narrators of "Bird-Watching at Night," "After Building the Lego Star Wars Ultimate Death Star," and "Go, Ghost, Go"–but all in very different ways. How do each of these narrators approach the past? Why does it matter so much to them in the present? What affect does it have on them?

Vocabulary

skip the door, omit, voluminous, nostalgic, lateral violence, lauded, infinitesimal, indigenous, existential, callous, idiom

“War Dances”

Summary

“War Dances” is the longest short story in the collection and is broken into five sections, each of which is titled.

The narrative begins with “My Kafka Baggage,” with the narrator describing his return from a trip to Los Angeles to find a dead cockroach in his bag. The narrator brings his suitcase outside and dumps everything on the sidewalk in case there are more inside. He does not find any, and he feels bad for the cockroach, wondering what it felt as it died.

In the section titled “Symptoms,” the narrator describes suffering from allergies so badly he can barely hear out of his right ear. With his wife away on a trip, it is up to the narrator to care for their sons, ages eight and ten. The narrator feels bad because he does not hear his sons when they first ask for dinner, and so makes them a big dinner. He then prays his deafness will clear up, and that a small angel will fly out of his ear and thank him for sheltering her transformation from a cockroach.

In “The Symptoms Worsen,” the narrator’s deafness becomes even worse so he goes to see his doctor. It is the first time he has been inside a healthcare facility since the last time his father had surgery.

In “Blankets,” the story steps back in time. The narrator remembers sitting with his father after his father had half his right food cut off, and three toes from the left foot. He remembers his father being cold, and getting his father a light blanket after having to await an impatient nurse. Because this blanket was not warm enough, the narrator recalls seeking out a real blanket, and running into a fellow American Indian with whom he spoke about family and nostalgia. He remembers asking the Indian if he had a spare blanket, to which the Indian responded that the narrator was being racist against his own people for thinking all Indians always have blankets with them. The narrator recalls how, a moment later, the Indian and old Indian shaman gifted him with a blanket, which the shaman blessed with a song for the narrator’s father. It was after delivering the blanket to his father that the narrator remembers his father beginning to sing, his joining in, and his knowing the song could comfort, but not defeat illness or death.

In “Doctor’s Office,” the story returns to the present. The narrator wonders how many cockroaches are in his head. The narrator wishes his wife were present. The doctor orders an MRI. The narrator worries his hydrocephalus has come back.

Analysis

The titular story of the collection, “War Dances,” touches upon all of the major themes that the collection itself ultimately explores. In “War Dances,” the narrator’s own health

problems cause him to reflect on the past. The past the narrator considers is not only his own personal past as far as his experiences with his now-deceased father are concerned, but this past also speaks broadly to Native American culture. The narrator contends that his father heavily disappointed him (his father was an alcoholic), and the narrator takes comfort in the trials of someone who has come before him and who has had to deal with health concerns (his father). This is supplemented by the scene in which the narrator encounters another Indian whose family provides a blanket to the narrator's father to keep him warm–but not before the holy man blesses the blanket. The narrator believes such a song is useless beyond the comfort it can provide, but even so, it is still a comforting thought that something of the past can be used in such a way for his father.

In the present, the narrator himself feels very lonely without his wife at his side. Although it is clear the narrator loves his family–especially his children–it is also clear that his wife is dear to him in a way that no others are. Her absence has already made him lonely, but given his diagnosis, he is made even lonelier without her. The diagnosis the narrator receives is certainly a surprise, for outwardly, nothing appeared to be wrong with him. Even internally, his hearing loss cannot easily be accounted for, though Prednisone takes care of the issue. Nevertheless, the narrator cannot help but consider the possibility that something bad–perhaps even fatal–could happen to him. This invariably leads him to consider God's existence, noting that at the end of his father's life, his father–an atheist–seemed to have found God. The narrator's father also believed that, if God loved Indians, he would have made them white, meaning that the Indians would not have suffered because they would have been loved as whites appear to be. The relationship that Americans–including American Indians–have with God is presented here and this will become a subtle but important theme in other stories as well.

In keeping with the theme of the unexpected, the idea that not all things are as they seem to be also becomes central to this story. Little of anything is as it actually appears to be in "War Dances." The narrator's outward health appears to be good, but in actuality, a potential tumor and hearing loss prove otherwise. The narrator at first appears to have a good relationship with his father given his devoted caring in the hospital, but the narrator later expresses his disappointment in his father despite feeling close. The narrator's potential diagnoses–potentially hydrocephalus and then a tumor–later prove not to be the case. The narrator's own father's contention that all of the maladies, misfortunes, and cruelties suffered by the Indians are proof they are not loved by God is also demonstrated to be untrue. Clearly God does love Indians, for as the narrator notes after being cleared, a white man called his brain beautiful.

Discussion Question 1

Although the narrator does not believe in Indian customs, he allows the Indian shaman to bless the blanket to be given to his father. Why?

Discussion Question 2

Although the narrator has his children and his extended family through the early days of his potential illness, he is still very lonely. Why is this so? What does this say about the nature of loneliness itself, especially with respect to the idea that someone can be lonely even when that someone is not physically alone?

Discussion Question 3

What is meant by the narrator's father arguing that, if God loved Indians, He would have made Indians white? Does the narrator believe this? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

charlatan, orate, sovereignty, context, hypothesize

“The Theology of Reptiles” – “Home of the Braves”

Summary

In the poem “The Theology of Reptiles,” the narrator describes finding a snake with his brother. The snake is apparently dead, midway through molting, and the brothers consider it as if it were like two snakes. The brother throws the snake over an electric fence but it shocks the snake back to consciousness, while the brother considers himself to be like the god of a snake.

In the short story “Catechism,” the narrator asks his mother about her Christian and Indian beliefs. The narrator’s father is a Catholic-turned-atheist. The narrator is a Coeur d’Alene Indian, and recounts how a Coeur d’Alene Indian holy man foresaw the coming of Christianity through a vision of three black ravens the day after which three Jesuit priests arrived; the holy man urged his fellows to hear the priests out or their world would vanish. The narrator explains that since that day, Coeur d’Alene Indians have been the most Catholicized Indians in America. When the narrator asks his father about nuns teaching him to play the piano, his father says he does not want to talk about it. His father reveals that his mother would always create an honor quilt when somebody in the family did something good, but that if his mother was to make him a quilt, it would be a quilt of guilt. When the narrator asks his father what his father thinks about God, his father responds that he is watching three crows on a telephone wire, and that he thinks the crows are talking trash about him.

In the poem “Ode to Small-Town Sweethearts,” on the way to see a girl, the narrator is caught in a bad snowstorm and finds refuge at the diner run by Mark Brown and his family. They are making food for others who have sought shelter there. Mark asks the narrator why he is out in such weather, to which the narrator responds he was on his way to see a girl.

In the short story “The Senators’ Son,” the narrator has not seen his best friend, Jeremy, in sixteen years. Angry and drunk, the narrator punches the friend in the face on Capitol Hill in Seattle, causing his nose to bleed. The narrator’s buddy, Bernard, pulls him back. Meanwhile, two of their friends are being beaten up by a gay guy they have decided to pick on. The narrator, a straight Republican, explains he is on Capitol Hill–a place known for being shabby, Leftist, and gay–to celebrate his junior partnership in a law firm. His father is a U.S. Senator from a working class background, and is kind, respectful, and just like Jimmy Stewart. He is a widower and has raised the narrator on his own. The narrator says he does not know why he would risk his father’s popularity and career for a night of gay bashing.

The narrator reveals that he and Jeremy were two of the handful of Republicans at their private school. The narrator reveals that one day, Jeremy drove him to a McDonald’s

thirty-some miles way to reveal he was gay. The narrator recalls being worried that Jeremy would like him, which led the narrator to repeat over and over he was not gay, even after Jeremy said he did not like the narrator like that. The narrator remembers being suddenly worried and afraid but unsure of how to respond, after which Jeremy told him to fuck off and drove away. The narrator remembers calling his father to come and get him, at which time he explained to his father what had happened. The narrator explains that his father was very understanding. Not long afterward, the narrator remembers, his father ran for State House, and to prove his desire to bring about a new era of change, moved with the narrator to an historically black neighborhood while having his son attend the racially-mixed Garfield High School.

When the story returns to the present it is five hours after the narrator has punched Jeremy in the face. The narrator's father is enraged and slaps him, asking him how he could do such a horrible thing. The narrator volunteers to take all the blame, but his father cannot understand how he could have raised a son who would do such a thing. The narrator's father believes deeply in God but that each person is responsible for his own actions. When the narrator's father asks him why he attacked two men, the narrator asks his father what to do. His father reveals that the police have reported the victims delivering conflicting statements about their attackers, and are unable to clearly identify them. The police believe the two victims are hiding something. The narrator's father tells his son that attacking those two men was a sin and that the sin must be paid for. As his father, the narrator's father says he must also pay for his son's sins. The narrator's father knows he will be judged harshly by God but cannot allow his son's stupidity to ruin his reputation. The narrator knows then that his father wants him to lie.

The narrator later goes to visit Jeremy and apologizes. Jeremy says he is not going to go public because he believes the narrator's father is the finest senator they have had and Jeremy is still a die-hard conservative Republican. Jeremy also assures the narrator that he will not let his boyfriend say anything about anything. Jeremy reveals that his own father beat him up the day he found out Jeremy was gay, but that years later, on his death bed, his father asked for forgiveness which Jeremy freely gave. Jeremy goes on to say that the narrator's father will one day make a great President, because he is an ordinary man with great ideas. Jeremy also says it would be idiotic of him to complain about gay marriage when millions of Muslim women are really repressed. The narrator wonders if Jeremy has been hurt so often he has lost his own spirit and pride in himself. They never talk again. The narrator's father loses reelection, and he and the narrator go on to pray for forgiveness for the incident with Jeremy.

"Another Proclamation" is a combination of a story and poem. In this narrative, one year before Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation, he orders the largest public execution in American history in Mankato, Minnesota. In this execution, thirty-eight individuals who are half-race, mixed-race, and American Indians are hanged for uprisings against the State and the citizens of the State. Thirty-seven are hanged, while one is granted a last-minute reprieve. The death songs of the dead must have been a cacophony but the mourning song of the survivor must have been even worse, the narrator contends.

“Invisible Dog on a Leash” is a short story that is divided into six sections, each of which is delineated by numbers.

In Section 1, it is 1973. The narrator and his father see Bruce Lee’s film Enter the Dragon. The narrator asks if Bruce Lee is the toughest guy in the world, to which his father responds that there are probably fifty guys in Spokane who could take Lee in an unfair fight.

In Section 2, after seeing a magic trick on TV, the narrator purchases a magic trick book at Rick’s Pawn Shop.

In Section 3, it is 1974. The narrator attends a magic expo and sees an elderly and funny Chinese man selling an invisible dog on a leash. When the narrator learns this is just a trick, he cries.

In Section 4, in 1976, the narrator sees the King Kong remake with his father. It is a horrible remake, so the narrator shouts about how it is not real from the top of his van.

Section 5 also takes place in 1976, as the narrator meets a gorgeous teen girl from Redding, California. The girl explains that her uncles make all the footprints and dress up as the monster everyone believes is Sasquatch. She explains her uncles even acted as extras in Planet of the Apes.

In Section 6, the narrator explains that the 1970s broke his heart’s ass.

In the poem “Home of the Braves,” the narrator says that he enjoys taking on girls in rebound relationships after they have been left by their horrible husbands or spouses. He gives them gifts and says he would marry them. He considers himself on the warpath for such girls, but knows to them he will be just one more boy.

Analysis

The theme of loneliness is central in the story “Invisible Dog on a Leash.” This narrator’s loneliness comes not from being physically alienated from other people, but from being alienated by the idea of reality. Magic and movies are demonstrations of things that do not actually exist, and this causes the narrator something of an existential crisis in which all the things he loved and enjoyed turned out not to be true. This is demonstrated best by the narrator’s decision to climb on top of his van to shout that the movie everyone is watching at the drive-in is not real. He is the only one saying this. He later explains that the 1970s broke his heart’s ass, meaning that he was never before lonely in that same fashion before learning the truth about such things in the 1970s.

The sole reprieved Indian in “Another Proclamation” also illustrates the theme of loneliness as thirty-seven others hang while he does not. The son of the Senator in “The Senator’s Son” also feels something of loneliness as his honest father wants him to lie, and as the son struggles with his own feelings of remorse. His father’s insistence that

the son lie alienates the son from his father, who has been his one true supporter, defender, and role model–and now is none of them.

That his own son should be involved in gay bashing is traumatizing to the son's father in "The Senator's Son" for two important reasons: First, the Senator has been making important gains in demonstrating the Republican Party is not hostile to gays and other minorities. Second, and even more importantly, the Senator considers himself a failure as a father for his son to have committed such an act–something which the Senator explains is a sin. The narrator and his father both believe in God, but the father is especially religiously devout. The Senator knowingly commits a sin to protect his son and himself, and he and his son spend the rest of their lives praying to seek forgiveness for what they have done. To be confronted with such a situation is a surprise, and here, the theme of life being full of unexpected surprises once again becomes central to Alexie's collection of stories and poems.

Interestingly enough, while the Senator and his son seek forgiveness from God, they have already been forgiven by the son's victim, Jeremy. Jeremy is gay, and from a generalized standpoint, most would assume Jeremy would be a liberal Democrat. In reality, this is not the case. Jeremy is actually a more conservative Republican than the son or his Senator father. Interestingly, Jeremy does not go to the press and does not press charges because he contends more harm than good will come from such a situation. This is also an unexpected surprise given the situation, but it doesn't make things any easier for the son or the Senator to deal with. While they may not be in any legal trouble, they both know they are in deep moral trouble for what has happened. The narrator wonders if Jeremy's forgiveness comes as a matter of his having been hurt so often for being gay that fighting back has been beaten out of him, but it is possible that Jeremy is simply that forgiving, especially given the son's direct, in-person apology.

Discussion Question 1

What sort of loneliness does the sole surviving Indian of the Minnesota execution proclamation in "Another Proclamation" endure? How is his loneliness different from the loneliness experienced by other narrators in this collection? Why is this so?

Discussion Question 2

How does the discovery that things like magic and movies are not real cause the narrator of "Invisible Dog on a Leash" to feel lonely and alienated? How does he attempt to cope with this? Why?

Discussion Question 3

In the short story "The Senator's Son," why do you believe Jeremy forgives the Senator's son rather than pressing charges or going to the press? What does the son believe explains Jeremy's actions? Why?

BOOKRAGS

Vocabulary

approximated, heeded, indecipherable, pretentious, bewildered, pernicious, obtuse, patricide, felonious, exploitation

“The Ballad of Paul Nonetheless” – “Ode for Pay Phones”

Summary

“The Ballad of Paul Nonetheless” is related from a third-person narrator who describes Paul as the waits at the O’Hare Airport in Chicago. Paul sees a beautiful woman wearing red Puma sneakers. He finds the shoes enhance the woman he sees, so he waves but is ignored. Paul knows the woman must be bored of being hit on all the time. He considers how Americans consider themselves to be very different, but are actually very similar because they know the words to the same pop songs. Songs remain as fixed in the minds of each generation as do the important moments of the generations, he believes. Paul has a very positive view of Americans, knowing they are decent and good people who on the whole are able to get past things like race and religion.

Paul, owner of a used clothing chain, decides to pursue the woman in the red Pumas. Paul catches up to the woman and introduces himself, but stumbles over his words, saying the woman has a beautiful smile, and if her name is Sara, he will lose his mind. The woman says her name is not Sara. Paul goes on to say that the woman has made him think of two Hall and Oates songs, and that it is a sign of what he does not know, but that it is a sign nonetheless.

This catches the woman’s attention, for she has never before heard anyone use the word “nonetheless” in a conversation. Paul goes on to explain that he believes she has stories she needs to tell him. The woman is flattered, but explains she is married. She then goes her own way. Paul himself is separated with three daughters, but wishes to remain married. Paul has separated from his wife due to the lack of sex with her and his affairs with eight other women. He is now working hard to win back the love of his family despite feeling no lust for his beautiful wife, and can only become sexually aroused when imagining other men with her. Months later, he runs into the woman with the red pumas again at Los Angeles International Airport. Paul and the woman begin talking, during which time he confesses his affairs. The woman is not impressed, revealing her own father cheated through all fifty-two years of her parents’ marriage. Paul believes it is a sign that he and the woman have now seen each other twice, while the woman writes it off as a coincidence. The woman explains she is a microlender for a startup. She then turns Paul down.

Paul and his wife meet with their marriage counselor. Paul confesses the loss of his sexual desire for her, which hurts her deeply. Paul knows the births of their daughters changed her body and in the delivery room, he saw bloody things that made him feel like she was dying, but he does not say this. Paul thinks about his daughters, knowing he has always been able to provide them with good, vintage clothing. Paul buys his three daughters iPods, and loads the iPods up with songs he knows and loves. Paul explains that this is so his daughters can love what he loves, but his eldest says they

don’t have to love all the same things. Three years later, Paul sees a woman whom he believes to be the woman in the red pumas at Detroit Airport, but realizes it is not her. Paul still pursues the woman, and the woman calls security. Paul is detained. He explains he knew it wasn’t the same girl, but wanted to pretend. In an effort to connect with the two guards watching over him, Paul begins singing. Paul goes on to say he is very sorry for everything and wants to remember every song and article of clothing because he believes they’ll be forgotten. He then begins saying “don’t forget me” over and over again.

In the poem “On Airplanes,” the narrator is amused by couples who always ask to change seats with strangers so they can sit near their loved ones on flights. The narrator has been asked to trade seats twenty or thirty times over the years, and always does.

In the short story entitled “Big Bang Theory,” the narrator notes that, despite common ancestry, all human beings believe in different stories of creation. The narrator remembers being a kid and learning how to swim at the YWCA pool before seeing Jaws in theaters. He remembers sitting between two teenaged Asian girls while holding their hands, and hiding his face in one of their breasts. In the present, the narrator wonders whatever became of those two girls. The narrator believes if he could go back, he would tell the two girls about the bonnethead shark that once had a virgin birth, and about the other species, such as insects, that give virgin birth. The narrator considers that one human birth brought about one of the world’s great religions, while animal virgin births mean nothing.

“Ode for Pay Phones” is a combination poem and short story. In this narrative, the narrator uses the pay phone on Third Avenue to call the girl he likes to ensure she is not sleeping with anyone. The narrator feels horrible each time the phone rings and is not answered. Years later, the narrator wishes he could call back everything he loved.

Analysis

The theme of loneliness affects not only sympathetic characters, but unscrupulous characters as well. Paul, in “The Ballad of Paul Nonetheless,” is one such unsympathetic, lonely character. No longer attracted sexually to his wife, he has multiple affairs because he feels lonely. Even when attempting to win back the love of his family, Paul seeks yet another affair–this time with a married woman–and it results in further alienation as she rejects him twice. His desperate loneliness causes him to pursue a lookalike woman, which in turn leads him to be rejected and then detained by security for harassment. Seeking to break out of his loneliness and appeal to other human beings around him, Paul begins singing, believing music is something all Americans have in common. Instead, he further isolates himself by making himself appear crazy for randomly singing.

The theme of loneliness also affects the narrator of “On Airplanes,” who always gives up his seat to couples who want to sit beside one another so that they will not be lonely. In

“Big Bang Theory,” the narrator recalls the first time he was ever close to a woman’s breast, when at the age of nine, he buried his face in the chest of a sixteen year-old Asian girl at the movie Jaws. The narrator, now lonely, looks back with great warmth and comforting nostalgia on the memory. The narrator of “Ode for Pay Phones” is himself very lonely, and uses a payphone to keep in touch with the girl he loves, worried she might be sleeping with someone else. Although it is not clear why the narrator does not make a move on the girl he loves–or perhaps he has already been rejected–it is clear that the narrator battles his loneliness through ritual calling.

The stories and poems in this section of the collection should also be noted for their thematic commonality of life being full of unexpected surprises, both good and bad. Paul, desperately lonely, is surprised to encounter the same woman twice several months apart, and considers this a good sign–though in the end, Paul’s surprise is a bad surprise when he is detained by security for harassing a woman who looks like the first. The nine-year-old narrator of “Big Bang Theory” is pleasantly surprised when he gets to hold the hands of two teen girls–and when he gets to bury his face in the breasts of one of the girls. The narrator of “Ode for Pay Phones” is always surprised when he calls the girl he likes. The surprise is good when he learns no one is staying the night with her, but the surprise is bad when he learns that somebody is.

Discussion Question 1

Although Paul, from the story "The Ballad of Paul Nonetheless," is an unsympathetic character, he is still lonely. Why is this so? How does he attempt to cope with his loneliness? What happens as a result?

Discussion Question 2

Why are the surprises that Paul of "The Ballad Paul Nonetheless," the narrator of "Ode for Pay Phones," and the narrator of "Big Bang Theory" all experience, all different? How do each of these lonely characters respond to these surprises? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the narrator of the short story "Big Bang Theory" look back on his childhood with such warm nostalgia, while the narrator of "Ode for Pay Phones" has such mixed emotions about the past?

Vocabulary

familiarity, bemusing, vanquished, belittling, hyperbole, condescension, ubiquitous, metaphysical

“Fearful Symmetry” – “Food Chain”

Summary

“Fearful Symmetry” is a short story that follows protagonist Sherwin Polatkin. Sherwin and his friends, including Karen, go to see the movie The Breakfast Club. During the movie, Karen holds Sherwin’s hand and plays with his fingers. It is far more intimate to him than the sex he has had with three other girls. Nothing ever comes of it, but The Breakfast Club becomes his favorite movie. On August 11, 1984, Wayne Ford and eleven other firefighters battle a wildfire in Sirois Canyon, near Wenatchee, Washington. The fire spreads, so Ford builds an escape fire which clears out an area of burnable material, the ashes of which Ford and his fellows hunker down in and survive. A book is written on the event, bearing the title Fearful Symmetry: The True Story of the Sirois Canyon Fire, which borrows its title from William Blake’s famous poem, “The Tyger.” Now an adult, Sherwin is hired to adapt the book into a screenplay. Sherwin, a Native American, explains to producers he fought a fire once as a young man, but he also knows there is redemption to be found in the story.

Sherwin changes many aspects of the true story, such as setting it in 2003, while creating the idea that Ford could see tigers in the fire as it chased him and his team up the slope. In Sherwin’s screenplay, only Ford survives the fire simply because he is fast enough, and therefore does not know about escape fires until years later, allowing the 2003 setting. Here, Ford is based on real-life fire runner Richard McPhee, who actually outran a fire, and who is blended together with Ford to create the fictional character Joseph Adams. Joseph Adams is plagued by survivor’s guilt, but finds redemption by sacrificing himself so he dies while everyone else on his team lives. The script is heavily edited by the director and executives, cutting things like the tigers in the fire. This is too much for Sherwin, who says the book is reliant on, and about Blake, and so too must be the movie. Sherwin is then fired for refusing to eliminate Blake’s tigers.

Sherwin, also a writer in addition to a screenwriter, begins writing odes to firefighting smoke jumpers but ends up suffering from writer’s block. Sherwin takes to doing crossword puzzles to pass the time and try to free his mind and learns he is really good at them. He travels to Stamford, Connecticut, for the American Crossword Puzzle Championship. Sherwin enters into Group C, which consists of newcomers. There, Sherwin meets a woman named Mai who helps fill him in on all the rules, regulations, and ins and outs of the competition. Sherwin does horribly, and heads home. On the flight home, he attempts the New York Times’ crossword puzzle. To impress a fellow passenger, Sherwin fills everything in at random. He realizes he is a liar, but that storytelling is nothing but lying. He realizes he has just set himself an escape fire, having been running from Hollywood all along. He now wonders if he has the ability to begin writing again and to go back to the days of Karen and innocence.

In the poem “Ode to Mix Tapes,” the narrator explains that in the present day, it is very easy to make a mix tape, whether it is a CD or a playlist. In the old days, he reveals,

making a mix tape took hard work and effort, and required serious thought. In the old days, the narrator contends, mix tapes were blue-collar work meant to seduce and win love. Mix tapes, the narrator explains, were vessels containing devotion, pain, and promises made that could never be taken back.

“Roman Catholic Haiku” is a short story that is related in three parts, each delineated with a title. The first of these is “Humans,” in which the narrator describes attending Gonzaga University in 1985 along with nuns. He and his friends often yell Shakespeare’s line from Hamlet, “Get thee to a nunnery!” at each other, but never at the nuns out of respect. The narrator surmises that the nuns are amused by this.

In “Nature,” the narrator describes the brown recluse spider as not being aggressive, but very dangerous. The brown recluse spider has markings on its body that resemble a violin, meaning the spider could be thought of as a tattooed musician.

In “Collision,” while online at lunch behind a nun, the narrator slaps a brown recluse spider off her shoulder. The nun glares at him. He points down to the spider, which the nun crushes underfoot. The nun apologizes to both the narrator and the spider.

“Looking Glass" is a poem that describes October 5, 1877, when Chief Joseph and his Nez Perce Indian band surrender to General Oliver Howard and the Ninth Cavalry. Joseph says he will fight no more forever. He lives on another twenty-seven years to see many of his people die of exile on the Colville Indian Reservation, hundreds of miles away from the ancestral tribal lands in Wallowa Valley in Oregon. Joseph comes to be a babysitter for the narrator’s grandmother, braiding her hair.

In the short story “Salt,” the narrator is assigned to write the obituary of the Spokesman-Review obituary writer, Lois Andrews, who has died of breast cancer at age forty-four. Lois had many friends but no family, and her will stated she wanted the narrator to writer her obituary. This confuses the narrator, as the two did not know one another well. The narrator does know that Lois’s work was important to her, but that she kept a good sense of humor in such a morbid position. The narrator does his best to do her justice, making the obituary simple and noting things such as there being no funeral and her body being donated to science. This latter part disturbs the narrator, for he is an Indian and explains that Indians revere dead bodies more than live ones. Until a permanent writer can be found, the narrator is assigned to write obituaries. The narrator finds himself talking to a schoolteacher named Mona who cannot afford the rate of writing her own obituary for her deceased husband, or for running his photo in the papers, so the narrator gives her a cheap rate of twenty bucks.

He then has to arrange it with the layout department to ensure the woman’s obituary runs. He is then sent out to gather the photo and obituary from Mona. The narrator learns that Mona lives alone; her children are grown and live elsewhere; her husband has been dead for six months; and even her cat is dead. Mona says she hopes her husband and Henry the cat are reunited in Heaven. To ensure Henry got to Heaven quicker, Mona says, she poured salt on Henry after the old Egyptian custom. However, the salt caused the cat to come back to life for a little while, something witnessed by the

vet and everyone else. The woman then asks for the obituary and the photograph back, saying her husband was a very private man and would not want such things in the paper. The narrator realizes the woman has dementia. The narrator goes to the shore, where he prays to Jesus and wades into the water, naked.

In the final poem of the anthology, “Food Chain,” the narrator asks to be buried in an anthill and set on fire after a week of the ants feasting on his body. He hopes this will allow his smoke to rise to startle crows to take flight into the sky with the narrator’s last words that he loved his life.

Analysis

Life is full of unexpected surprises, good and bad, as the narrator of “Fearful Symmetry” discovers. The good unexpected surprises are to be found in the life-or-death discovery of escape fires, and in the narrator landing the screenwriting job for the movie script for Fearful Symmetry. The unexpected bad surprises come in learning the script is to be heavily edited to the point that it is unrecognizable. The unexpected surprise in “Roman Catholic Haiku” comes from the narrator smacking a poisonous spider off the shoulder of a nun, which is both a good and unexpected surprise for the nun. The unexpected bad surprise for the spider comes in being crushed by the nun. The unexpected surprise for the narrator of “Salt” comes in a very bad way, as he learns the woman for whom he has promised to write an obituary is slipping into dementia relating to the past.

The widow of “Salt” also lives in the past, at least in her own mind. She lives as though she was living in happier times and remembers and misremembers things as a result of her dementia. The narrator of “Ode to Mix Tapes” recognizes the past is not the present. He reflects warmly on making mix tapes in the past, because the process was more involved, more time-consuming, and more thought-provoking. Mix tapes were statements of love and feeling, the sharing of something deeply personal and deeply emotional between two people. The narrator of “Fearful Symmetry” hopes that, by returning to his motivations of the past, by recalling a more innocent time, he may begin again as a writer.

The Loneliness of life is illustrated through the narrators of both “Salt” and “Food Chain.” As the narrator of “Salt” visits with the widow, he learns bits and pieces of her past and the past of her husband. In the present, she is very much alone, and very much lonely. This situation is only exacerbated by her dementia, as at times she is either wholly aware of her loneliness or unaware of it at all. The narrator himself bathes in a lake to cleanse himself of the sadness, and to pray to Jesus that he should not live forever like the woman with dementia. Salt is symbolic of life in the story, while the water itself serves to be symbolic as cleansing and purifying. Likewise, there is great symbolic imagery from the narrator of “Food Chain,” who wants his body to feed the earth but his spirit, borne by the smoke, to rise up to Heaven while startling crows–symbolizing the flight of his soul to Heaven.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the narrator of "Fearful Symmetry" walk away from his screenwriting job for the book, Fearful Symmetry? Why does he then lose his confidence as a writer? How does he believe he can regain it?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the narrator of "Salt" go out of his way to have an obituary printed for the widow who calls him and asks him about submitting an obituary? What happens instead? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the narrator of "Salt" feel the need to pray and bathe at the shore following his encounter with the dementia-ridden widow? Why does he not want to live forever?

Vocabulary

titillated, nomads, arrogant, behest, contractually, impediment, dysfunctional, mortified, assailed, superseded, superimposed, sensationalized, shadowboxed, indiscriminately, senile

Characters

The narrator of “The Limited”

The narrator of “The Limited,” an unnamed poet, confronts a man who tries to run over a stray dog. The narrator does not know why he thinks he can change the world, knowing he can only truly change himself.

George Wilson

The narrator of “Breaking and Entering,” George Wilson, is a married father and freelance video editor of Native American descent whose house is broken into by a black teen who tries to attack him. Wilson kills the black teen in self-defense and becomes the target of an unjust media firestorm. Wilson is even doubted by his own wife, who thinks he may have killed the teen in anger. When Wilson later has a chance to run over a group of antagonist black youths, he refuses to do so, proving the truth to himself.

The narrator of “Go, Ghost, Go”

The narrator of “Go, Ghost, Go“ is a writer who recalls a conversation had with a white professor who hates all white people and wants them to die. The narrator considers that the professor probably wants to be a Jesus-like martyr, sacrificing even himself.

The narrator of “Bird-watching at Night”

The narrator of “Bird-watching at Night,” unnamed, is broken up with by his girlfriend because he believes he is an owl. Years later, the narrator misses his girlfriend, but realizes he misses the owl more.

The narrator of “After Building the Lego Star Wars Ultimate Death Star”

The narrator of “After Building the Lego Star Wars Ultimate Death Star” is surprised that his son should reassure him that the Lego Death Star they have built is just a toy, and will not kill anyone. This reminds the narrator of when he himself was a kid, and felt like a god pretending to be a warrior.

The narrator of “War Dances”

The narrator of “War Dances” is a married father who is beset with sudden illness which he fears may either be a brain tumor or the return of childhood hydrocephalus. He recalls his own father’s illness and death, his father’s struggles with belief in God, and how Indian customs meant so much to his father at the end. In the present, the narrator is cleared of all illnesses and his thrilled when his wife returns from her trip.

The narrator of “The Theology of Reptiles”

The narrator of “The Theology of Reptiles” is an unnamed boy whose brother throws what appears to be a dead snake on an electrified fence, only to have the snake jolted back into consciousness. This makes the narrator consider his brother a god to a snake.

The narrator of “Catechism”

The narrator of “Catechism” studies the religious beliefs of his parents. His mother is a devout Christian who brings Indian beliefs into practice in conjunction with Christianity. His father is an atheist who took twelve years to decide he did not believe anymore.

The narrator of “Ode to Small-Town Sweethearts”

The narrator of “Ode to Small-Town Sweethearts” is an unnamed teenager who, while traveling to see his girlfriend, is caught in a bad snowstorm. He takes refuge at a diner owned by the parents of his friend, Mark, who himself is impressed by the narrator’s desire to see his girlfriend despite the weather.

The narrator of “The Senator’s Son”

The narrator of “The Senator’s Son,” unnamed, is a conservative Republican who beats up his gay former best friend, Jeremy, also a very conservative Republican. The narrator knows he has screwed up and jeopardized the career of his father, a U.S. Senator, and so apologizes to Jeremy for what happened. Jeremy readily forgives him, saying there are more important things in the world. The narrator is then forced to wonder if Jeremy’s pride has been beaten out of him permanently after receiving so much abuse for being gay.

The narrator of “Another Proclamation”

The narrator of “Another Proclamation” recounts how, in addition Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln issued a proclamation a year earlier condemning thirty-eight Indians to death. At the last moment, the narrator notes, one Indian was

spared, but was forced to live with survivor's guilt and the tragedy that so many others died.

The narrator of "Invisible Dog on a Leash"

The narrator of "Invisible Dog on a Leash" is heartbroken to discover that things like magic and movies like King Kong are not real through the course of growing up in the 1970s. He vents his frustration by shouting King Kong is not real from the roof of his van at a drive-in movie.

The narrator of "Home of the Braves"

The narrator of "Home of the Braves," unnamed, enjoys engaging in rebound relationships with girls. Each one is a new mark of achievement for him, while to the girls, he knows he is just another man.

Paul

This main character in "The Ballad of Paul Nonetheless" believes that all Americans are united by their shared love of music. A separated but married father, the unscrupulous Paul attempts unsuccessfully to pick up a married girl at an airport twice. When he later tries to pick up another woman who resembles the first, but refuses her rejection, he is detained by security. He sings to the guards to speak to their common humanity, but is just written off as crazy.

The narrator of "On Airplanes"

The narrator of "On Airplanes" is always asked to give up his seats so that couples may sit next to one another. The narrator is amused by, and happy to do this.

The narrator of "Big Bang Theory"

The narrator of "Big Bang Theory" reflects fondly on his childhood when he saw the movie Jaws. During the movie, he held the hands of two sixteen year-old Asian girls and buried his head in the breasts of one of the girls.

The narrator of "Ode for Pay Phones"

The narrator of "Ode for Pay Phones" is a lonely young man who uses a payphone to call the girl he likes each night. When she answers, he knows she is alone and he feels better. When she does not answer, he knows someone is with her and is unhappy.

The narrator of “Fearful Symmetry”

The narrator of “Fearful Symmetry” is an unnamed screenwriter who comes to suffer writer’s block after being fired from a job for opposing too many liberties being taken with his work. The narrator turns to crossword puzzles, but loses a crossword puzzle competition he enters. On the flight home, he pretends to fill out the New York Times crossword quickly to impress a fellow traveler, after which time the narrator considers himself to be a liar, as all fiction writers are. He is reminded of the innocence of youth, and hopes that by tapping into the past, he can return to write well once more.

The narrator of “Ode to Mix Tapes”

The narrator of “Ode to Mix Tapes,” unnamed, looks back wistfully to a time in which creating a mix tape was far more complicated and involved than a mix CD or a playlist on an iPod. The narrator believes because a mix tape took more effort, it meant more and contained more emotion.

The narrator of “Roman Catholic Haiku”

The narrator of “Roman Catholic Haiku,” unnamed, is a student at a university shared with a nunnery. The narrator recalls saving a nun from a brown recluse spider by smacking the spider off her shoulder, after which the nun crushed the spider.

The narrator of “Looking Glass”

The narrator of “Looking Glass” recounts the story of the surrender of Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce Indians. After Chief Joseph surrendered, the narrator recalls, he watched many members of his tribe die on the reservation, and came to babysit the narrator’s grandmother.

The narrator of “Salt”

The narrator of “Salt” is a young man, unnamed, who is given temporary work as the head writer of obituaries at the local paper when the obituary writer herself dies. The narrator takes on the request of a widow for an obituary for her husband, only for the narrator to learn the widow has dementia. The narrator prays and bathes on the shore, asking Jesus not to let him live forever.

The narrator of “Food Chain”

The narrator of “Food Chain” speaks about how he wants his body to be handled after death. The body is fed to the ants, then burned so that the smoke will startle crows overhead, so that they in turn may symbolize the flight of his soul to Heaven.

Symbols and Symbolism

Baseball bat

An aluminum baseball bat is purchased by George Wilson of “Breaking and Entering” for his son. It is later used by George Wilson to defend himself against the black teen who breaks into his home and tries to attack him. Wilson’s use of the bat kills the teen, and his death creates a media firestorm.

Owl

An owl, symbolizing the freedom of youth through flight, is encountered by the narrator and his girlfriend in the story “Bird-Watching at Night.” The girlfriend breaks up with the narrator because the narrator thinks he is an owl. Now older, the narrator realizes he misses the owl more than the girl.

Blanket

A blanket, symbolizing the rejection of the past by some American Indians, is gifted to the narrator of “War Dances” to help warm up his father in the hospital. The blanket is sung and prayed over before it is given, which the narrator knows will not do anything to help his father and is an outdated custom. However, the narrator comes to realize that the comfort the blanket provides is important enough.

Invisible dog on a leash

An invisible dog on a leash symbolizes the loss of innocence and belief in the short story “Invisible Dog on a Leash.” Upon learning in the 1970s the invisible dog on a leash he sees is not magic but merely a ploy, the narrator comes to realize everything–including the movies–are not real. The narrator thus looks back at the 1970s with unhappiness for the loss of innocent belief.

Airplane seats

Airplane seats are routinely given up by the narrator of “On Airplanes” so that couples may sit beside one another in flight. The narrator does not really mind doing this, as he wants people to be together and be happy. However, the narrator does not say that he has ever been in the situation of asking someone else to switch seats.

Songs

Songs are believed to be the common thread that holds Americans together, or at least so Paul believes in “The Ballad of Paul Nonetheless.” When Paul refuses to take rejection by a woman at an airport and continues to pursue her, he is detained by security. Seeking to reach out to the common humanity of the guards, he sings to them. Instead, the guards write him off as crazy.

Escape fire

An escape fire features into the story “Fearful Symmetry” and symbolizes a chance to try again. An escape is a fire which is used to burn an area to ashes ahead of a wildfire, so that people may hunker down in the already-burned ashes and survive the wildfire itself, which cannot burn what has already been burned. The narrator of “Fearful Symmetry” creates his own metaphorical escape fire by quitting his screenwriting job, getting involved in crossword competitions, losing, and pretending to quickly fill out a New York Times crossword puzzle to impress a fellow traveler. He considers this to be an escape fire of his own so that he may in turn get back to writing.

Mix tapes

Mix tapes are considered better manifestations of a person’s emotion, according to the narrator of “Ode to Mix Tapes.” Because mix tapes take longer to create, they are more personal and have to be more thought out. Because they are more thought out, they are better demonstrations of love and promises made from one person to another in the gifting of a mix tape.

Water

Water is symbolic of cleansing and purification, and features centrally into the short story “Salt.” The narrator, after visiting a widow with dementia, realizes she is old, alone, and sad. The narrator does not want to end up like her, so he cleanses himself of his sadness by bathing in water and praying to Jesus that he does not live forever.

Crows

Crows are seen as symbolic of faith and religion in two short stories, both for Christianity and for Native American traditions. In “Catechism,” three crows serve as an omen of the arrival of new religion to an Indian village, where the next day, three Catholic Jesuit priests arrive. In “Food Chain,” crows are seen as needing to be startled to represent the soul of a dead Native American transcending the Earth for Heaven.

Settings

Spokane

Spokane is a major city in Washington State, in the Pacific Northwest of the United States of America. Spokane features into several stories in passing or mention, but features primarily in the story “Breaking and Entering.” The narrator, George Wilson, is not only a member of the Spokane Tribe of Indians, but owns a home in Spokane where he lives with his wife and children. It is in Spokane that Wilson must defend himself against a black teen who breaks into his house and attacks him, and it is in Spokane that the media and protests come against Wilson unjustly.

Seattle

Seattle is a major coastal city in Washington State, in the Pacific Northwest of the United States of America. Seattle features into several stories in passing or mention, but features most prominently in the story The Senator’s Son. On Capitol Hill in Seattle, a place known for its leftwing culture, the narrator and his friends look to beat up some gays. The narrator himself punches his former best friend, Jeremy, in the face while on Capitol Hill. The narrator comes to quickly regret what happened, and seeks out Jeremy elsewhere in Seattle to apologize. It is in Seattle that Jeremy explains he will not press charges or go to the press, wanting the narrator’s father’s career to continue on unimpeded by what has happened.

Washington

Washington State is one of the fifty states of the United States of America, and is located in the Pacific Northwest of the country. The vast majority of the stories and poems of the novel occur in Washington, as all distinguishable characters of the novel live in the state. Most of the narrators are identified as Native Americans of Washington-located Indian tribes, such as George Wilson from “Breaking and Entering,” the narrator of “War Dances,” and the narrator of “Catechism.”

Airports

Airports feature importantly into several stories in the collection, and serve as symbolic places of coming and going, as people are beginning or ending journeys or stages in their lives. Airports feature most prominently into the story “The Ballad of Paul Nonetheless,” in which Paul pursues a woman even though he is separated but trying to save his own marriage. Here, Paul seems to be ending one phase of his life while beginning another, but his pursuit of another woman ends his activities because he is detained by security.

Airplanes

Airplanes appear in several places through the collection, but feature importantly in two stories and poems, symbolizing the idea that everyone is always in transition from one place to another in their lives. In the story “Fearful Symmetry,” the narrator is on his way home from a crossword puzzle contest, and having failed, pretends to do a New York Times crossword puzzle quickly to impress another passenger. Here, the narrator begins to make the transition from a failed screenwriter to one who is starting over again. The narrator of the poem “On Airplanes” speaks about how, as he travels, he always gives up his airplane seats to couples so that they may sit together in their journeys to wherever it is they are going.

Themes and Motifs

Loneliness

Author Sherman Alexis explores the theme of loneliness through several main characters in his story and poem collection War Dances. Loneliness in the collection comes as a result of personal choices, situations out of one's hands, and as a result of difficult times and situations. The loneliness suffered by the characters of the collection therefore affects each one in different ways.

In "The Limited," the narrator feels lonely because he knows as a poet he cannot change the world and can only change himself. In "Breaking and Entering," George Wilson's self-defense killing of a black teen that breaks into his house leads to his alienation by the media and his own wife, all who suspect racial motives and hotheadedness. In "Bird-Watching at Night," the narrator feels lonely now that he is older, and looks back to when he had a girlfriend who broke up with him because he believed he was an owl, thus leaving him alone. In "War Dances," the narrator feels lonely in recalling the death of his father, but he also feels lonely having to deal with his own illness while his wife is away. Because his wife is away, the lonely narrator invests himself in recalling the past to find common ground with his father.

In "Ode to Small-Town Sweethearts," the narrator must deal with temporary loneliness when he is unable to make it to his girlfriend's during a snowstorm by taking refuge at a diner owned by a friend and his family. In "The Senator's Son," the son must deal with loneliness of a moral nature when he beats up his gay former best friend, and then has his friend forgive him even though the son does not believe he deserves to be forgiven. In "Another Proclamation," the sole surviving member of a mass public execution must deal with loneliness and survivor's guilt after he alone is spared among thirty-seven others from death. In "The Home of the Braves," the narrator deals with his own loneliness and the loneliness of countless girls by engaging in rebound relationships with them. In "The Ballad of Paul Nonetheless," Paul, who is lonely and trying to prevent a divorce, nevertheless pursues other women to handle his loneliness, and tries to reach out to fellow human beings through song. Instead, Paul is labeled crazy and detained by security.

In "Invisible Dog on a Leash," the narrator feels lonely and alienated when he learns that magic and movies are not real. In "On Airplanes," the narrator always allows couples to take his seat so that they will not have to sit alone. In "Big Bang Theory," the narrator recalls being with two pretty Asian teenage girls at a showing of Jaws, and not feeling lonely when he held their hands and buried his head in the breasts of one of them. In "Ode for Pay Phones," the lonely narrator calls the girl he loves to see if she is or is not with someone else. In "Ode to Mix Tapes," the lonely narrator talks about how much more meaningful mix tapes are versus CDs and iTunes playlists, due to the amount of time a real mix tape requires to make. Finally, the narrator of "Salt" feels bad

for a lonely old widow suffering from dementia, prompting the narrator to pray to Jesus to not let him live to be so old and lonely.

Life's Unexpected Surprises

The theme of unexpected surprises in life recurs throughout Sherman Alexis's story and poem collection War Dances. The surprises that the characters in each of the stories and poems face come about for different reasons. The surprises they face also affect their lives in different ways.

In "The Limited," the narrator is surprised to see a man try to kill a helpless dog, and feels lonely when he realizes he cannot change the man or the world. In "Breaking and Entering," George Wilson is surprised to have his house broken into, surprised to have to kill in self-defense, and even more surprised that the media and his own wife should turn against him. This causes him to doubt himself. In "Bird-Watching at Night," the narrator is surprised when his girlfriend breaks up with him, causing him great heartache and loneliness. In "Go, Ghost, Go," Sherman Alexie is stunned to discover a white professor who wants to kill all white people as a matter of repayment for past sins. In "After Building the Lego Star Wars Ultimate Death Star," Alexie is surprised by the maturity of his son who reassures him that the Death Star is only a toy.

In "War Dances," the narrator is surprised to fall ill when he is not expecting it, and even more surprised that he should take comfort in memories of his father when his wife is away on vacation. In "The Theology of Reptiles," the narrator and his brother are surprised when a seemingly dead, electrically-shocked snake returns to life. In "The Senator's Son," the son is stunned when his gay former best friend, Jeremy, refuses to go to the press or to press charges with the police after being beaten up by the son in order to protect the son's father. In "Invisible Dog on the Leash," the narrator is surprised and saddened to learn that magic and movies are not real. In "The Ballad of Paul Nonetheless," Paul is surprised not only to be detained by security after pursuing a girl who has repeatedly rejected his advances, but also surprised when he is written off as crazy for singing to the guards in a vain attempt to appeal to their common humanity.

In "Ode for Pay Phones," the lonely narrator is always surprised when he calls the girl he loves to figure out whether she is, or is not, with another man that night. When she is not, he is happy, but when she is, he is sad. In "Roman Catholic Haiku," the narrator and a nun are surprised to discover a brown recluse spider crawling on the nun, which the narrator smacks away and the nun crushes underfoot. In "Looking Glass," the narrator is surprised to learn that Chief Joseph used to babysit his grandmother and braid her hair. Finally, in "Salt," the narrator is surprised to learn that the woman for whom he has agreed to print an obituary actually has dementia, her husband having passed away six months before.

The Influence of History

History and nostalgia influence life in countless ways, especially for American Indians, the author argues in this collection. The past is always present and influences the present in surprising ways. This is especially true for certain characters in the collection.

In “Go, Ghost, Go,” the narrator is surprised to find a white professor who wants to kill all white people, including himself, for the past sins of some white people. In “Bird-Watching at Night,” the lonely narrator recalls his past, where his girlfriend broke him with him for his believing he was an owl. In “War Dances,” American Indian customs provide comfort to the narrator’s dying father, as a blanket is gifted to him which has been sung and prayed over. This is very important to the narrator and his father, for the past matters to the father in his dying days, while the past memory of his father’s dying days matters greatly for purposes of comfort to the narrator in the present.

In “The Theology of Reptiles,” the narrator recalls his boyhood when his brother threw a supposedly dead snake on an electrical fence, only for the snake to be shocked back to life. In “The Senator’s Son,” the son recalls his friendship with his gay best friend, Jeremy, after encountering Jeremy years later and punching him in the face. In “Another Proclamation,” the narrator recalls Abraham Lincoln’s proclamation that thirty-eight Indians are to be hanged in Minnesota for crimes against the state. In “Invisible Dog on a Leash,” the narrator recalls the 1970s when he lost his childlike innocence by learning magic and movies were not real.

In “Big Bang Theory,” the narrator combats his loneliness when he recalls his time as a nine year-old boy when he went to see the movie Jaws in theatres and held the hands of two Asian girls, burying his face into the breasts of one of them. In “Ode to Mix Tapes,” the narrator reflects nostalgically on how much more effort went into making a mix tape in the old days, versus a mix CD or an iPod playlist in the present day. He believes the amount of time taken in a mix tape meant more emotion and more promises were invested in its creation. In “Looking Glass,” the narrator recalls the surrender of Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce Indians, how many died on the reservation, and how Chief Joseph came to babysit his grandmother. Finally, in “Salt,” the widow recalls the past and the distant past as though they were and were not happening to her in the present, because of the dementia from which she is suffering.

The Individual’s Relationship to God

The relationship Americans have with God varies according to the individual. This is a matter of personal belief and personal life experiences. Yet in each situation in which characters doubt the existence of God, they still tend toward God in their ideas and actions.

In “Catechism,” the narrator asks his parents about their beliefs. The narrator’s mother is a devout Christian who reveres Indian ways and has brought them in line with Christianity, while the father is an atheist after twelve years of consideration. Still, the

father reflects on God by noting the tribe converted to Christianity when three Jesuit priests appeared following an omen of three crows by an Indian holy man. The father now considers that three crows outside the house are talking trash about him, indicating that he does still believe in a higher power; otherwise the crows would be meaningless.

In “The Senator’s Son,” the devoutly religious U.S. Senator is horrified that his son has been involved in gay bashing. He considers this not only a reflection on his fathering, but also a sin. Nevertheless, the Senator seeks to cover up the incident while the man attacked has no interest in pursuing it, and forgives the son. After this, the Senator and his son both pray to God nightly for forgiveness. In “Roman Catholic Haiku,” the narrator saves a nun from being hurt by a brown recluse spider, and watches as the nun kills and then prays for the now-dead spider.

In “Salt,” the elderly widow tells the narrator of how her cat came back to life after being sprinkled with salt, but how the cat died again a short time later. She explains that she hopes her cat and her husband have reunited in Heaven. The narrator later bathes on the shore and prays to Jesus that he will not live to be so old he will be lonely and suffer from dementia. Finally, in “Food Chain,” the narrator describes what he wants done with his body after death: he wants it fed to the ants, then burned, and wants the smoke to startle crows, symbolizing the flight of his soul to Heaven.

False Appearances

Things are not always what they seem to be, argues Sherman Alexis in his story and poem collection War Dances. Whether things are not what they are expected to be, stereotyped to be, or at first believed to be, these false appearances have great weight in the stories in which they appear.

Because he has the ability to write, the narrator of “The Limited” believes he can change the world, but learns appearances are not what they seem when he realizes he can only change his own life. To the outside world, the death of the black teen in “Breaking and Entering” appears to be racism, but to the reader and to George Wilson, the situation is not what it appears to be at all. The narrator of “Bird-Watching at Night” believes he is spending what appears to be a nice night with his girlfriend, only to have his girlfriend break up with him. The narrator’s son in “After Building the Lego Star Wars Ultimate Death Star” knows appearances are not what they seem and that a Lego Death Star is not real.

In “War Dances,” the narrator at first considers Indian customs to appear to be outdated mythology, but then learns they matter in terms of bringing comfort even if they don’t actually heal anyone. In “The Theology of Reptiles,” the narrator and his brother find a snake that appears to be dead, only to have the snake return to life after being thrown on an electrified fence. In “The Senator’s Son,” the son’s gay former best friend, who by stereotypes should be a liberal prepared to go public with being beaten up, is actually a conservative Republican who refuses to say anything out of forgiveness and protection of the son’s father’s Senate career.

In “Invisible Dog on A Leash,” the narrator learns that movies and magic are not what they appear to be. They are all not real and merely clever tricks and craftsmanship. In “Salt,” the narrator learns that a lonely widow who wants an obituary run for her husband has actually been widowed for a long time and is suffering from dementia. Old age is not all it appears to be: while many would value living to such an old age, the narrator comes to believe he himself does not wish to live to such an age.

Styles

Point of View

Sherman Alexie relates the stories and poems in his collection War Dances in both the first and third-person, and in limited, omniscient, and reflective perspectives. “The Limited,” “Breaking and Entering,” “Go Ghost Go,” “Bird-Watching at Night,” “After Building the Lego Star Wars Ultimate Death Star,” “War Dances,” “The Theology of Reptiles,” “Catechism,” “Ode to Small-Town Sweethearts,” “The Senator’s Son,” “Invisible Dog on A Leash,” “Home of the Braves,” “On Airplanes,” “Big Bang Theory,” “Ode for Pay Phones,” “Fearful Symmetry,” “Ode to Mix Tapes,” “Roman Catholic Haiku,” “Looking Glass,” “Salt,” and “Food Chain” are told in the first-person, while the stories “Another Proclamation” and The “Ballad of Paul Nonetheless” are told in the third-person. Many of the stories are told in reflection, with narrators looking back on past events, such as in “War Dances,” “Ode for Pay Phones,” and “Bird-Watching at Night,” while others deal with events in the present, such as “Fearful Symmetry,” “Salt,” and “Food Chain.” Themes make the difference. For example, the stories that reflect on the past draw heavily on the theme of the influence of history and the past, such as “Invisible Dog on a Leash,” while events of the present–such as those that occur in “On Airplanes”–deal with themes relating to loneliness.

Language and Meaning

Sherman Alexie’s stories and poems in War Dances reflect language that is poetic but simple. This is because Alexie is not only a poet, but that he has included poetry throughout the collection as well as stories. The simplicity of the language reflects the love and beauty that American Indians find in the simplicity of nature and life. Alexie is himself a Native American, and most of his characters are also Native Americans. This allows him to spell out his themes clearly and to clearly portray symbolism. For example, consider Alexie’s way of revealing how two friends grow apart in the short story “The Senator’s Son” on page 90: “We became rumors to each other.” Or consider the symbolism of the flight of birds as being the soul ascending to Heaven in his poem Food Chain on page 209: “Startle those birds/ Into flight/ With my last words/ I loved my life.”

Structure

Sherman Alexie’s War Dances is a collection of twelve poems and eleven short stories that share similar themes and ideas, with most featuring Native American narrators, characters, or Washington residents. The collection begins with the poem “The Limited” in which loneliness is subtly considered in the narrator’s inability to change the world, while “Food Chain” deals with the subtle loneliness of impending death. The collection begins with a poem, then moves to a short story, then moves to a poem, and so on

through the course of the collection until the final poem in the novel. The poems act as a break between stories, allowing the reader to step back and consider not only the story just read, but the poem as well for its simplicity and poignancy. The alternating back and forth between story and poetry is itself similar to the structure of poetry, creating a situation in which the alternation is like a metered rhyme. Some of the stories–such as “Another Proclamation” and “Ode for Payphones” combine both poetry and short story formats.

Quotes

Why do poets think/ They can change the world?/ The only life I can save/ Is my own.
-- Narrator (The Limited)

Importance: When Alexie's collection of poems and stories begins, he leads off with a disturbing confrontation with a man who tries to hit a stray dog with his car. The narrator backs down, and returns home to question why all poets think they can change the world. Instead, the narrator contends, they can only change their own lives. This is a statement of irony, as Alexie himself–a poet–calls on the reader to change their own lives through understanding his work, else he would not write at all.

Skip the door.
-- Mr. Baron (Breaking and Entering)

Importance: The narrator reveals this piece of advice, given to him by his film professor from college, Mr, Baron, early in the story. Skipping the door means to omit any unnecessary information. The narrator uses this advice through life, including in his own writings and work as an editor. However, when the narrator must defend himself against a black thief, and the media accuses him of racism, he realizes the world has missed entirely the door part of the story–where the teen broke into the house and attacked him.

If God really loved Indians, he would have made us white people.
-- Narrator's father (War Dances)

Importance: When the narrator faces his own health issues, he compiles a series of questions and facts about his father, including his father's philosophy on life in general. One such belief is that if God loved Indians, He would have made the Indians white. The narrator's father believes that Indians do not have the grace of God that white men do. However, the narrator is cleared in terms of his health, with the doctor calling his brain "beautiful." The narrator wants to tell his dead father what has happened, but his father is not around to tell anymore that the narrator has had the grace of a white man.

We became rumors to each other.
-- Narrator (The Senator's Son)

Importance: After the narrator finds out his best friend is gay, the two get into a fight because the narrator does not know how to respond. After this, as the narrator's father runs for State House, the narrator and his father move to an historically black neighborhood to put their money where their mouths are about improved relations between the races. The narrator and Jeremy fall out of touch until the night the narrator punches Jeremy in the face.

My father knew the world was complicated and unpredictable–and that only God knew the ultimately truth–but he also knew that each citizen of that world was ultimately

responsible for his actions.
-- Narrator (The Senator's Son)

Importance: The narrator has a difficult time figuring out why he decided to, along with friends, attack two gay men, including Jeremy. The narrator apologizes to Jeremy, who lets it go, refusing to make a big issue out of it because he believes that, in the grand scheme of things, it does not matter. Instead, he wants to see the narrator's father succeed as a politician, and to bring about great change to the state and the country.

It's not real.
-- Narrator (Invisible Dog on a Leash)

Importance: The narrator is horrified when he learns that certain things–such as magic–are not real. It causes him to question much of his own life, and to call out that which is not real, such as the King Kong movie he sees which causes him to shout that it is not real. This underscores the thematic idea that things are not always what they seem to be.

Despite all the talk of diversity and division–of red and blue states, of black and white and brown people, of rich and poor, gay and straight–Paul believed that Americans were shockingly similar.
-- Narrator (The Ballad of Paul Nonetheless)

Importance: Paul believes Americans have more in common than they think because they all listen to the same songs and know the same songs. He believes this unites them. Paul, who has been unable to connect with his wife sexually, looks for connections with other women, and attempts to find these connections through songs as a way to find common ground. His pursuit of one woman at an airport whom he mistakes for another woman ends him up in a security cell, at which time he randomly begins to sing to connect with the guards.

Whenever I'm asked/ To trade seats /For somebody else's love/ I always do.
-- Narrator (On Airplanes)

Importance: Here, the narrator reflects on something that always happens to him during plane trips. Couples usually ask him to trade seats so that they might sit near one another. This amuses the narrator, who always consents to moving so that those who love one another might sit near one another.

Did you know that you can escape a fire by setting another fire at your feet? You might seem to be building a funeral pyre, but you're creating a circle of safety.
-- Narrator (Fearful Symmetry)

Importance: The narrator explains that in order to escape a wildfire, one can create an escape fire. This burns all burnable material around a person before the larger fire arrives. The person then lays face down in the ash of the intentional fire, and avoids being burned to death. This becomes the basis for a book and a movie based on the

book that Sherwin is hired to write, though he cannot bring himself to make the changes demanded by the studio.

I am a lying genius, Sherwin thought. And what is lying but a form of storytelling?
-- Sherwin (Fearful Symmetry)

Importance: To impress a fellow airplane traveler, Sherwin pretends to fill out the New York Times crossword puzzle quickly. He realizes he is a liar, but that as a storyteller, this is not a bad thing. He realizes he has set an escape fire through this, having run from Hollywood's consuming fires. Sherwin now decides to get back down to his roots, reflecting on his youth and holding hands with a girl in a darkened theater.

Jesus, I don't want to die today or tomorrow, but I don't want to live forever.
-- Narrator (Salt)

Importance: The narrator has a saddening experience when he arrives at the home of a widow who wishes to run an obituary. He discovers the woman has dementia, and lives a life very much alone. He comes to realize he himself may end up like that one day, but does not want it to happen. He cleanses himself of his sadness by submerging into a lake after praying to Jesus that he does not want to live forever like the widow, for she is living in a way that is not really living.

Startle those birds/ Into flight/ With my last words:/ I loved my life.
-- Narrator (Food Chain)

Importance: The narrator wishes to die in a very symbolic way. He wishes his body will feed nutrients to the living world by being buried in an anthill. He then wishes his body to be set on fire so the smoke will rise up to the sky, startling crows into flight. This in turn symbolizes his soul's flight to freedom in Heaven.