What You Pawn I Will Redeem Study Guide

What You Pawn I Will Redeem by Sherman Alexie

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Introduction

"What You Pawn I Will Redeem," first published in the April 2003 issue of *The New Yorker* magazine, is Sherman Alexie's contemporary take on the classic quest tale. The main character, Jackson Jackson, embarks on a journey to reclaim his grandmother's stolen powwow regalia, a quest that becomes a journey toward fulfillment and personal identity. Along the way, Jackson's interactions with friends and strangers help fill in the details of his life and his character. As a homeless Spokane Indian far from home and without family, Jackson's mission to reclaim his family heirloom becomes a link to his past, his future, and his cultural identity.

Alexie creates a world in which Jackson, who describes himself as "a Spokane Indian boy, an Interior Salish," must come to terms with his literal and figurative homelessness, despite the fact that his "people have lived within a one-hundred-mile radius of Spokane, Washington, for at least ten thousand years." The reader cannot ignore Jackson's candid references to the history of violence, oppression, and displacement that have long since characterized the indigenous experience in America. Yet Jackson's lighthearted wit and sharp sense of humor make him less like an object of pity, and more reminiscent of the Shakespearean fool—one whose keen observations, although often dismissed as the mere ramblings of an incompetent, somehow capture the essence of truth as it is experienced within the narrative.

Jackson is a generous character, embodying his own assertion that "Indians are great storytellers." He constantly struggles to assert his own identity in terms of his "Indian-ness" without falling into the pitfalls of stereotyping. He is comfortable making declarations like "it's an Indian thing," while also being capable of explaining the subtleties and cultural differences between Indian tribes. The story has a simple structure and a somewhat predictable outcome, but Alexie relies on the strength of Jackson's character to pull the reader along on his adventure. As Ann Patchett, a 2005 O. Henry Prize Juror, remarks in her essay explaining why she picked "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" to be distinguished as a *Juror Favorite*, "Sherman Alexie is in love with his homeless Spokane Indian narrator and so he simply steps aside to let his character have every inch of the stage."

Thematically, "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" is Alexie's attempt to play with and subvert the common motifs of the "lone Indian" and the "noble savage" that pervade much of American literature. Alexie goes beyond the stock images of Native Americans in his portrayal of Jackson and allows the character to develop a voice beyond his cultural caricature into that of an individual. Although Jackson's interactions with white men during the course of the story are pivotal, they echo with unfulfilled treaties, broken promises, and the resultant landlessness of the Native American. "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" appears as part of a collection of nine short stories, *Ten Little Indians* (2003).

Author Biography

Sherman Alexie

Sherman Joseph Alexie Jr. was born in Spokane, Washington, on October 7, 1966, to Sherman Joseph, a Coeur d'Alene Indian, and Lillian Agnes Cox, a Spokane Indian. He grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation. As an infant, he was diagnosed with hydrocephalus, an abnormal swelling of the brain due to excess fluid, and was not expected to survive to adulthood. At six months, he had surgery to correct the problem, but his head remained enlarged. This caused him to isolate himself from others as a child. Alexie turned to books to escape the poverty and alcoholism of the reservation, and by age twelve he had read all of the books at the Wellpinit School Library. When Alexie finished Washington State University, he was one of the first members of his tribe to graduate from college.

Much of Alexie's writing focuses on reshaping the idea of the Native American within the context of the mainstream American imagination, and he draws inspiration from his youth spent on the reservation. Alexie's unromantic depictions of reservation life and the highly politicized nature of his writing have made him a controversial figure in contemporary American literature. Other works by Alexie include the short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), the novel *Indian Killer* (1996), and the screenplay for *Smoke Signals* (1999).

Jackson introduces himself to the reader by telling of his move twenty-three years ago from Spokane to Seattle to go to college, where he "flunked out within two semesters, worked various blue- and bluer-collar jobs for many years, married two or three times, fathered two or three kids, and then went crazy." Jackson then introduces the people he hangs out with on the street, his "teammates" Rose of Sharon and Junior, both also Indians. The three spend the morning panhandling in front of Pike Place Market and earn five dollars, which they promptly decide to spend on a bottle of liquor. On their way to 7-Eleven, the group passes a pawnshop, and Jackson immediately recognizes his grandmother's powwow regalia hanging in the display window. He had only seen the regalia in photos because it was stolen fifty years ago, but he knows it is hers. The group goes into the shop to speak to the owner about getting the stolen regalia back.

In order to convince the pawnshop owner the regalia is his grandmother's, Jackson tells the pawnbroker to search for a yellow bead hidden somewhere on the costume. He explains that "Indian people sew flaws into their powwow regalia" because "they don't want to be perfect." After some searching, they come upon the single yellow bead hidden beneath the armpit. The pawnbroker feels bad about the situation, but he does not want to give the regalia away because he just paid one thousand dollars for it. Jackson considers the white pawnbroker's reaction to the situation, saying, "He sounded sad about that. Like he was sorry for taking advantage of our disadvantages." Rose of Sharon and Junior suggest going to the police, but Jackson wants to be fair to the pawnbroker. The pawnbroker offers to sell the stolen regalia to Jackson for nine

hundred and ninety-nine dollars, but only if Jackson can return with the money by noon the following day. The shop owner even gives Jackson twenty dollars to start him on his quest.

At 1:00 P.M., the friends stop at 7-Eleven and spend all of the cash on "three bottles of imagination" to help them think of how to raise the rest of the money. Jackson and Junior fall asleep in an alley, and then they awake, Rose of Sharon is gone. Jackson says he hears later she has gone back to live with her sister on the reservation. Junior is still passed out, so Jackson decides to set off by himself. His mission leads him to the wharf, where he meets three Aleut cousins who are staring out at the bay, crying. Jackson explains that many of the homeless Indians in Seattle come from Alaska. They work their way down the coast on fishing and transport boats, and end up "broke and broker … trying to find [their] way back to the boat and the frozen north." The men smell like salmon even though they have been away from their boat for eleven years. He asks to borrow some money, but they do not have any.

At three in the afternoon, Jackson checks in on Junior, who is still unconscious. He thinks about his grandmother, Agnes, who died of breast cancer when he was fourteen years old. He wonders if her cancer had in fact started to develop when someone stole her powwow regalia, and not when she was run over by a motorcycle, as his mother always suspected, or because of the uranium mine on the reservation, as his father had thought.

Inspired once again to restore a sense of order to his world, Jackson sets off. This time, he ends up at the Real Change newspaper office. Jackson knows Real Change's mission statement by heart—"Real Change is a multifaceted organization that publishes a newspaper, supports cultural products that empower the poor and homeless, and mobilizes the public around poverty issues"—because he sometimes sells their newspapers on the streets for money. To sell the newspapers, he must stay sober and Jackson confesses, "I'm not always good at staying sober." He must pay thirty cents per newspaper, but he can sell them for a dollar each. He asks the "Big Boss" at Real Change for 1,430 copies of the paper, the number he would have to sell to make a thousand dollars. Like the pawnbroker before, the Big Boss sympathizes with Jackson's situation but tells him it would be impossible to sell that many papers in one day. Plus, Jackson would need over four hundred dollars to buy the papers in the first place. After hearing Jackson's story about his grandmother's regalia, the Big Boss gives Jackson fifty free papers to sell.

Back at the wharf at 5:00 P.M., Jackson manages to sell five papers before giving up. He heads straight to McDonald's and spends the money he has just made on four cheeseburgers. Soon after eating them, he vomits on the sidewalk, noting, "As an alcoholic Indian with a busted stomach, I always hope I can keep enough food in my stomach to stay alive." Returning to check on Junior, he thinks again about his grandmother. He recalls a story she told him about her time as a nurse during World War II. He claims she told him this story when he was sixteen, yet he previously told the reader his grandmother died when he was fourteen. Finding Junior still passed out, he

takes two dollars and fifty cents from him and heads toward the Korean grocery store in Pioneer Square.

At the store, Jackson talks to Kay, the owners' daughter. He spends the money he took from Junior on a fifty-cent cigar and two scratch-off lottery tickets that cost a dollar each, hoping to win the maximum prize of five hundred dollars per ticket, but his lottery tickets yield no cash prize. Luckily, though, one of them does win him another ticket, which turns out to be a hundred-dollar winner. He gives Kay twenty dollars of his winnings, saying "it's tribal. It's an Indian thing. When you win, you're supposed to share with your family." Kay protests that she is not his family, but he tells her that she is and she keeps the money. Upon returning to share the good news of his windfall, he discovers Junior is gone. He later hears that Junior "had hitchhiked down to Portland, Oregon, and died of exposure in an alley behind the Hilton Hotel."

"Lonely for Indians," Jackson takes his remaining eighty dollars to an Indian bar called Big Heart's, located in South Downtown. There he divides his money equally among the bar patrons, buying five whiskey shots for each of his Indian "cousins" in the bar. He explains, "I didn't know any of them, but Indians like to belong, so we all pretend to be cousins." He meets and drinks with Irene Muse, a Duwamish Indian, and Honey Boy, a bisexual Crow Indian. As the evening winds down, a very drunk Jackson is beaten up and kicked out of the bar. At four in the morning, he falls asleep on the train tracks, wrapped in a plastic tarp he has taken off a truck. Two hours later, he is awoken by Officer Williams, the "second-best cop" Jackson has ever known. Williams listens to the story of Jackson's grandmother's stolen regalia and the pawnbroker's deal. Williams chides Jackson for sleeping on the train tracks and takes him toward the detox facility so he can sober up. Jackson protests, playfully pointing out "that place is awful…. It's full of drunk Indians." In the police car on the way, the two men discuss Jackson's grandmother's death in 1972, his grandfather's murder, and the ironic sense of humor Williams sees in Native Americans. To this, Jackson explains: "The two funniest tribes I've ever been around are Indians and Jews, so I guess that says something about the inherent humor of genocide."

Jackson tells Williams he reminds him of his grandfather, a tribal cop who "never arrested people. He took care of them." He explains the situation that led to his grandfather getting killed in the line of duty, saying, "We aren't like those crazy Sioux or Apache or any of those other warrior tribes … we Spokane, we're passive, you know? We're mean with words." Having convinced Williams that the success of his quest is more important than detox, Williams offers Jackson thirty dollars toward the cost of the regalia, telling him, "I believe in what you believe…. I hope you can turn thirty bucks into a thousand somehow."

Eight o'clock finds Jackson back at the wharf with "those three Aleut men still wait[ing] on the wooden bench." Jackson convinces them to sing some ceremonial songs for him and they do. He says, "They sang about my grandmother and their grandmothers. They were lonely for the cold and the snow. I was lonely for everybody." Two hours later, the Aleuts finish their singing and Jackson thanks them. He offers to treat them all to breakfast at a diner called Mother's Kitchen and the Aleuts accept. At the restaurant, the

men eat in silence and Jackson spends all but five dollars on the meal and the tip for the waitress.

At noon, Jackson and the Aleuts part company. He explains that later on he hears that "the Aleuts had waded into the saltwater near Dock 47 and disappeared. Some Indians said the Aleuts walked on the water and headed north. Other Indians saw the Aleuts drown." At his noon deadline, Jackson returns to the pawnshop. He initially has trouble finding it, circling block after block until he sees it "located in a space I swore it hadn't been filling up a few minutes before." He offers the owner his remaining five-dollar bill. The owner wants to know if Jackson worked hard for the money and when Jackson tells him yes, the owner closes his eyes and thinks. Then he steps into his back room and returns with the regalia. He holds it out to Jackson, but Jackson protests that he does not have the money, and that he wanted to "win it." The owner responds, "You did win it. Now, take it before I change my mind."

"Do you know how many good men live in this world? Too many to count!" Jackson remarks to himself as he walks outside and dons the regalia. He steps into the intersection, where he begins to dance. Cars and pedestrians stop to watch: "They all watched me dance with my grandmother. I was my grandmother, dancing."

Plot Summary

"What You Pawn I Will Redeem" is the story of a financially strapped Spokane Indian man faced with the task of coming up with nearly one thousand dollars in twenty-four hours in order to reclaim his grandmother's stolen powwow attire from a pawnshop. The story takes place in Seattle over the course of one day, and is narrated by the central character, Jackson Jackson.

Themes

Cultural Homelessness

"What You Pawn I Will Redeem" begins with the line, "One day you have a home and the next you don't." It is a deceptively simple, almost glib statement, referring both to Jackson's literal homelessness, living on the streets of Seattle, as well as his cultural homelessness as a Spokane Indian. Jackson, like all Native Americans, is culturally connected to a history of dispossession, forced removal, and lost lands. In this way, Jackson's homelessness resonates throughout the story. It represents not only his material state, but his psychological and cultural states as well.

In some ways, Jackson's quest to reclaim his grandmother's stolen powwow regalia can be paralleled with the history of the Spokane tribe. Just as Jackson's grandmother's regalia was stolen and has become an item for purchase, the Spokane suffered centuries of exploitation at the hands of white settlers and the U.S. government. Before he regains the regalia, Jackson is relatively invisible as part of the homeless population in Seattle: "Homeless Indians are everywhere in Seattle. We're common and boring, and you walk right on by us, with maybe a look of anger or disgust or even sadness." But when Jackson dons his grandmother's regalia at the end of the story, his triumph is both personally and culturally significant. Reunited with his history and his heritage, he becomes instantly visible. Whereas before he had gone unnoticed, when dressed in the regalia he literally stops traffic: "Pedestrians stopped. Cars stopped. The city stopped. They all watched me dance with my grandmother." This moment signifies a shift in Jackson's status from an invisible, ignored homeless man to a spectacle of triumph, however brief. He has found a home—a place of belonging and comfort—in his grandmother's regalia.

Stereotyping and Individual Identity

One of the major themes in "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" is the notion of identity. Jackson introduces himself as a middle-aged, homeless, alcoholic Spokane Indian man. When he describes his life before becoming homeless, he does not romanticize his past. His life was not unlike other working-class American males, except that he went crazy, and has been homeless for six years. Before he tells the story of how he found and reclaimed his dead grandmother's powwow regalia, Jackson clarifies the elements of his life that seem to beg the most explanations.

Of his mental illness, Jackson informs the reader that he has been diagnosed with asocial disorder, which sounds a bit as though he could be violent or dangerous. He goes on to clarify that he has "never hurt another human being … physically," and is only a "boring heartbreaker," rather than a malicious "serial killer or something." Also, Jackson is noticeably unperturbed by his homelessness. He describes his homelessness as "probably the only thing [he's] ever been good at." Being homeless, therefore, is

an important part of his identity. He proudly explains the special treatment he receives from restaurant and store managers who allow him to use their employee bathrooms. It makes him feel "truthworthy" and distinguished from other homeless Indians in Seattle.

As Jackson emphasizes his individuality, he also introduces the notion of a collective Indian identity. Throughout the story, Jackson identifies himself as American Indian. His concept of what it means to be part of an indigenous culture is shaped largely by his own experiences and memories, as well as by popular stereotypes. He sees himself as separate from the stereotypes often used to describe Native Americans, yet he underscores these designations with statements such as "we Indians are great storytellers," and "we Indians have built-in pawn-shop radar."

Jackson says, "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." This statement reveals Jackson's assumptions about both groups of people. By setting himself apart from mainstream white society (as both a homeless person and a Native American), Jackson risks being seen as a stereotypical Indian. As a countermeasure, Jackson suggests his own, more flattering stereotype—that of the cautious or secretive Indian who refuses to be exploited by whites. This tactic allows Jackson to define himself in his own terms, while nodding toward the historical basis for that decision.

When speaking of homeless Indians in Seattle, Jackson says that passersby largely ignore them, except to perhaps bear "a look of anger or disgust or even sadness at the terrible fate of the noble savage." However, he also notes that "we have dreams and families" like anyone else. Here, Jackson acknowledges the common stereotype of the noble savage that has been used for centuries to stigmatize the American Indian, and he dismisses it. He has replaced the idea of the noble savage with the idea of dreams and families, in an attempt to allow for more compassion and humanity. It is important to Jackson to distance himself from negative images of Native Americans like the noble savage, yet a few lines later he declares, "we Indians are great storytellers and liars and mythmakers"—a statement that reinforces the idea that Native Americans can be discussed in terms of generalizations.

Stereotypes focus on identifying particular behaviors or traits often associated with a given race or culture. Jackson is a product of this sort of stereotyping. But Alexie has created a character that is able to see himself both as an individual man with unique experiences, and as a member of a larger group. Jackson allows himself to associate and belong within a wider framework of people who can identify themselves similarly, thereby finding validation for his own personal experiences. At the same time, he takes pains to assert his own individuality. Throughout the story, the reader sees Jackson's attempt to render his identity both in terms of his individual nature as well as in terms of his shared Native American experience without being reduced to a stereotype.

Ethnic Heritage

In the story, Jackson Launches his quest after he sees his grandmother's traditional powwow costume in a pawnshop window. He must then loom before the pawnshop owner sells it to someone else. His Journey, both literally and symbolically, is a journey to reclaim his ethnic heritage.

At the beginning of the story, Jackson has in many ways turned his back on his Spokane heritage. Most dramatically, he has moved away from the Spokane region to Seattle, even though his ancestors "have lived within a one-hundred-mile radius of Spokane, Washington, for at least ten thousand years." In Seattle, he pursued an average American life by attending college (where he flunked out within two semesters), working various low-level jobs, getting married "two or three times," and having children. His attempts to achieve this idealized lifestyle have met with utter failure.

Over the course of the story, Jackson meets other Indians who have also strayed from their heritage and homelands in one way or another. Like Jackson, his friends Rose of Sharon and Junior have been drawn to Seattle from their ancestral homelands. As the story progresses, both Rose of Sharon and Junior leave Seattle to different fates. Rose of Sharon returns to the reservation and lives with her sister, while Junior, who travels even farther from his Colville homeland to Portland, dies in an alley from exposure. One returns to her roots and survives; the other turns his back on his roots and dies. Jackson also meets three Aleut fishermen who want nothing more than to go back home to Alaska; he later hears that they "waded into the saltwater near Dock 47 and disappeared. Some Indians said the Aleuts walked on the water and headed north. Other Indians saw the Aleuts drown."

At the end of the story, Jackson manages to reclaim part of his ethnic heritage by obtaining his grandmother's powwow regalia from the pawnshop. He puts on the outfit and dances, feeling his grandmother's spirit within him. In this way, he once again embraces the history of his family and his tribe.

Historical Context

Native American Displacement

"[M]y people have lived within a one-hundred-mile radius of Spokane, Washington,. For at least ten thousand years," Jackson notes in. "What You Pawn I will Redeem." This Estimation is corroborated by David Wynecoop in his book *Children of the Sun* which offers a detailed history of the Spokane Indian tribe from precolonial times. Shortly after white settlers entered the Spokane country in 1807, Wynecoop notes that initially "little else changed" beyond profitable fur trading and intermarriage between whites and Indians. However, he notes, the arrival of the Christian missionaries "had a more lasting influence than even the white man's guns," as the Native Americans were forced to convert and were made subject to church laws and governance. With the acceptance of the white man's religion, Native Americans largely abandoned their traditional beliefs, which permanently altered their communities, traditions, and unique identities.

In 1850, Congress passed the Donation Act, which released "non-settled" (or Indian-occupied) lands for white settlement. The law allowed any citizen to claim up to three hundred and twenty acres in the Oregon Territory, which included present-day Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and parts of Wyoming and Montana. In order for Indians to retain claim of their land, they would have to sever any tribal affiliation and become American citizens. Most Native Americans refused this offer. Thousands of whites came to settle in the Oregon Territory, and many Indians were displaced from their homes.

Establishing the Spokane Reservation

Tensions increased between the white settlers and the indigenous population in the Oregon Territory. On January 18, 1881, President Rutherford B. Hayes issued an executive order establishing the Spokane Indian Reservation. The area set aside for the reservation reduced what had once been Indian land by 80 percent, from over three million acres to just over 150,000 acres. The document states that a "tract of land, situated in Washington Territory, be, and the same is hereby, set aside and reserved for the use and occupancy of the Spokane Indians." Wynecoop notes in *Children of the Sun* that the Lower Spokanes moved onto the reservation shortly after it was established, while "the Upper and Middle bands refused to relocate on the Reservation land" because they wanted compensation before ceding land title to the government. They argued that the reservation land was not ideal for hunting and fishing purposes, and there was concern about the religious differences between the various cultures of Spokane. The Upper and Middle bands came to an agreement with the U.S. government in 1887, in which they ceded title to all lands they claimed and moved onto one of the established reservations. Even after conceding to the demands of the government, the Spokane still had to deal with further encroachments by white settlers on their allotted territory. Wynecoop quotes a newspaper article that appeared in the *Spokesman Review* on November 10, 1907:

The first of the new year will witness a general house cleaning of the Colville and Spokane Reservations. All person [*sic*] who have no claim to allotment on these reservations will be required to leave the reservation and seek homes elsewhere. This will greatly facilitate the work of allotment. A strain of Indian blood is a valuable asset at present, and it is wonderful how many white skins have turned red lately.

As the article indicates, it was not uncommon at this time for whites to claim Native American ancestry for the sole purpose of acquiring land that had been allotted to the Spokane tribe. These and similar acts have long since contributed to the erosion of the Spokane reservation lands, and reveal the historical basis for Jackson's comment in "What You Pawn I Will Redeem": "One day you have a home and the next you don't.… Indians have to work hard to keep secrets from hungry white folks."

The Grand Coulee Dam

The Grand Coulee Dam was built on the Columbia River in Washington between 1933 and 1943, and is one of the largest generators of hydroelectric power in the world. The reservoir behind the dam covers reservation land once considered essential by the Colville and Spokane tribes. Additionally, the dam prevents the natural migration of many spawning fish species such as salmon, an important food source for many reservation Indians. In 1940, the federal government paid the Colville tribe $63,000 and the Spokane tribe $4,700 for use of their land. Since then, both tribes have actively pursued similar claims for "water power values," lost fisheries, financial losses, and additional compensation for general land usage. In 1994, the Colville tribe received a lump sum of over fifty million dollars, as well as an agreement for millions of dollars in annual payments; nearly ten years later, when Alexie wrote "What You Pawn I Will Redeem," members of the Spokane tribe had yet to receive any additional compensation.

Critical Overview

"What You Pawn I Will Redeem" appeared in *The New Yorker* magazine in April 2003. It is also part of Sherman Alexie's collection of short stories *Ten Little Indians*, published later that year. The bestselling book was distinguished as a *Los Angeles Times* Best of the Best Selection, a *San Francisco Chronicle* Best Book, and a *Publishers Weekly* Book of the Year. The story was included in the 2004 collection *The Best American Short Stories* and was a 2005 O. Henry Prize Juror's Favorite. In her essay on why she selected "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" as her favorite story of 2005, novelist and O. Henry juror Ann Patchett remarks, "As I read [this story,] I was moved by sorrow, compassion, and joy."

In "Way Off the Reservation: The Indians in Alexie's Fiction are Out for Redemption," *San Francisco Chronicle* writer David Kipen writes that *Ten Little Indians* is "a bookful of keepers … [that] belong to the rich tradition of assimilation fiction." Though he notes that the time element of "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" makes it a "gimmick story," it is also a "funny, sad, sentimental but villainless fable." In "Where the Men are Manly and the Indians Bemused," a review for the *New York Times*, Janet Maslin calls Alexie's writing in the collection "his winsome best," noting "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" as "especially stirring." William J. Cobb's review for the *Houston Chronicle*, "Stories Blend Comic, Tragic Situations," labels "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" as "Perhaps the finest story in the collection." A review in *Publishers Weekly* calls Alexie's writing "Fluent, exuberant and supremely confident," and writes that *Ten Little Indians* is a "slam dunk collection sure to score with readers everywhere." In "Stateless in Seattle," Maya Jaggi of *The Guardian* (London) applauds how the "stories irreverently explore the yearning for the sacred. In some of the best, Alexie lends the bleak minutiae of the street an epic resonance … but with more laughs." Alexie has become popular among academics and non-academics alike as one of the premiere Native American authors writing today.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Marin is a literature scholar, freelance writer, and poet. In the following excerpt, she examines the nature of Indian identity by exploring how duality is inscribed within the role of the "native informant" in Sherman Alexie's short story "What You Pawn I Will Redeem."

Like many other writers of color, Sherman Alexie has shouldered the burden of speaking on behalf of his people, whose voices are seldom heard in the predominantly white world of contemporary American literature. He does so with an unflinching sense of humor. His stories navigate the often treacherous terrain of love, politics, human weakness, and failure. Yet, in his literary work he is most concerned with redefining the Native American experience, or as he prefers, the *Indian* experience, by establishing a new collective identity based on the individual lives and voices of the personae he creates. As in the real world, Alexie's characters encounter their own "Indian-ness" both publicly and privately. Consequently, his characters must employ this "double consciousness" while constructing their identities. These characters are endowed with Alexie's own awareness of the negative stereotypes associated with indigenous peoples, and they therefore respond, interrogate, and interact with the images most often used to describe them. The effect is a text peopled with characters who understand that they are indeed performing and fulfilling the role of "Indian" within the larger narrative beyond the page into our natural world.

This is certainly the case in Alexie's "What You Pawn I Will Redeem," the story of Jackson Jackson's quest to retrieve his grandmother's powwow regalia found in a pawnshop fifty years after it was stolen. Jackson's desire to reconnect with what he feels is rightfully his is complicated by his financial instability. Jackson is homeless and broke, making the task of finding $999 to buy the regalia that much more challenging. The complications that arise and what eventually follows allow the reader to witness Jackson's experiences while maintaining some cultural distance from him. This distance epitomizes the overall concept of the native informant, which Alexie employs in "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" to reeducate his audience.

Jackson, the protagonist and narrator in "What You Pawn I Will Redeem," begins his story with the following lines:

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.

This opening immediately draws attention to the distance between Jackson's and the reader's societal positions. He is revealing an experience that is outside of the reader's own cultural context. This is established when the narrator references "you," the reader. He equates this exchange between himself and the reader to those that occur between the Indian and the "hungry white folks," who presumably want to obtain his "secret story." Jackson first establishes that a story is being told, then he reiterates that the

story is being told to someone who is markedly different from himself; namely, a white person. Jackson intends to tell his own story and is aware that by doing so, he prevents his own exploitation.

Jackson goes on to explain that he is "a Spokane Indian boy, an Interior Salish," who "grew up in Spokane, moved to Seattle," and led a relatively normal life before going "crazy." He refers to his mental illness with self-effacing wit, noting that having an "asocial disorder" does not make him "a serial killer or something." Moments like this one, where relevant information is divulged to the audience, characterize Jackson's extratextual interactions with the reader. These details are important to understanding Jackson and his story, but they are not necessarily part of the plot. They allow communication between the characters within the story and the reader. Speaking directly to the reader throughout the story, Jackson educates or reeducates the reader by providing additional details that simultaneously reveal his own (possibly erroneous) cultural presumptions.

After clarifying the relative harmlessness of his condition, it is important for Jackson to establish his identity—to define both himself and the parameters of his story. The importance of this background is made clear by its position in the text—Alexie dedicates the first few pages of this short story to these details from Jackson's past. Rather than accepting the terms others have used to define him, Jackson names himself a "crazy" "Spokane Indian," who after a life of "various blue- and bluer-collar jobs" finds himself homeless. He establishes himself as both an indigent and a Spokane Indian because he feels that these two factors most succinctly summarize his experience while setting up the action of his story. Jackson insists that, "Being homeless is probably the only thing I've been good at" and that "homeless Indians are everywhere in Seattle," before he goes on to describe the peripheral nature of his existence by saying, "We're common and boring, and you walk right on by us, with maybe a look of anger or disgust or even sadness at the terrible fate of the noble savage."

Jackson's introduction defines his relationship to the reader. Jackson represents himself as Indian while he performs the role of storyteller. This storytelling role is often associated with the popular stereotype of Indian-ness, which motivates his comment that "we Indians are great storytellers and liars and mythmakers."

In her essay, "Reconfiguring the Native Informant: Positionality and the Global Age," Shahnaz Khan notes that "Anthropologists identify the native informant as the person who translates [his or] her culture for the researcher, the outsider." She goes on to say that personally, having herself been "recruited into this role":

I do not make any claims about producing authentic knowledge about [my] culture. Instead, I complicate the process of knowledge production and claim that you, the reader, can only know about my research … via an analysis of my own location [outside that culture].

Perhaps this is what Alexie is doing by creating a character who sees himself not only as a complex individual, but also as one who is performing a racial and cultural service for the reader.

If the term "native informant" is applied to Jackson, then the readers must consider themselves to be "the researchers" or "the outsiders" that Khan refers to in her essay. As outsiders, readers interact with the native informant as they might a tour guide. In this way, Jackson takes the reader on a tour of what it means to be an Indian—specifically, a homeless Spokane Indian in Seattle. Therefore, the native informant in this story is a go-between for two cultures. He exists for the purpose of facilitating interaction between the "I" and the "Other" in pursuit of a mutual understanding. This dynamic—this exchange of information—is key to understanding the concept of the native informant.

Joseph Jeyaraj adds to this definition of the native informant in his essay "Native Informants, Ethos, and Unsituated Rhetoric: Some Rhetorical Issues in Postcolonial Discourses." He calls attention to the status of the native informant as one who occupies the space between his or her own society, and the society of the outsider or colonizer. The distance this distinction creates makes the native informant separate, and therefore more valid than the native, who is consequently defined as such by a marked lack of utility. The native informant is then perceived by the outsiders, as well as himself, as a valuable commodity. This objectification confers relevance, that is, a position of importance, within the new, postcolonial society. Jeyaraj speculates to this effect saying, "It may be that there is an eliteness associated with the personal lives of postcolonial native informants."

While introducing himself, Jackson makes a point of distinguishing himself from the others by including distinguishing details:

I've made friends with restaurant and convenience-store managers who let me use their bathrooms. I don't mean the public bathrooms either. I mean the employees' bathrooms, the clean ones hidden in the back of the kitchen or the pantry or the cooler. I know it sounds strange to be proud of, but it means a lot to me, being truthworthy [*sic*] enough to piss in somebody else's clean bathroom. Maybe you don't understand the value of a clean bathroom, but I do.

These details and others set Jackson apart from those who are not capable of interacting to this extent with outsiders. His ability to communicate a culturally sensitive story without fear of exploitation indicates that Jackson has been cast by Alexie in the role of native informant. Jackson and other native informants, as Jeyaraj describes it, "have a strong tendency to occupy these [roles] partly because these [roles] offer many perks and partly because there is [outside] pressure … to make them occupy these [roles]."

At many times during the story, Jackson delivers information to the reader for the purpose of contributing to a multicultural understanding of "Indian-ness." For example, shortly after introducing two of his companions, Jackson says, "I am living proof of the

horrible damage that colonialism has done to us Skins." He goes on to say, "I'm a strong man, and I know that silence is the best way of dealing with white folks." These statements establish certain complex cultural "truths" within the framework created by Jackson's Indian authority. The reader is in no position to disagree with Jackson, who has already established his narrative authority simply by distinguishing himself as separate from and speaking for the other Indians. These attempts to distinguish himself from or align himself with other Indians function as a means to divulge crucial information to the reader, who has now become the outsider Kahn mentions. For instance, the term "skins" calls to mind the systematic exploitation, assimilation, and elimination of indigenous cultures in the Western Hemisphere as a direct result of European colonialism. By using this racial slur himself, Jackson alludes to its history without neutering or excusing the word itself.

As the story develops, Jackson allows his native authority to underscore comments like, "we Indians have built-in pawnshop radar" and "because they don't want to be perfect, because only God is perfect, Indian people sew flaws into their powwow regalia." These statements read a lot like stereotypes, but they recast the role of "Indian" on Jackson's terms, thereby reeducating and informing the reader of specific cultural cues. The reader must then decide whether or not to accept Jackson's authority as the native informant based on his performance as "Indian," or to deny his representation of "Indian-ness" on the basis of unreliability.

Jackson's narrative authority may indeed be questioned in terms of his propensity to deliver edicts on subjects like "pawnshop radar," but it is reconfirmed by his singularity as the Indian voice within the text. Throughout the story, Jackson interacts with members of other indigenous tribes—Aleut, Plains, and Crow, all of whom are distinguished from Spokane Indians with descriptors like, "these Aleuts smelled like salmon." Each of these characters vanishes suddenly from the narrative, leaving only Jackson's voice behind. Near the end of the story, after leaving his Aleut companions, Jackson remarks, "I later heard the Aleuts had waded into the saltwater near Dock 47 and disappeared." These disappearing acts, which are not uncommon in the story, reinforce Jackson's status as *the* Indian spokesperson, and thereby reinforce his status as the native informant. In this way, the dominance of Jackson's voice is furthered by his singularity. Even though Jackson says, "Indians are everywhere," the reader only encounters Jackson's point of view. However problematic his conceptualization of the "Indian" is, Jackson is the only character who informs the reader of what it means to be Indian.

In "What You Pawn I Will Redeem," Alexie has demonstrated his capacity to display and fulfill the role of native informant by allowing Jackson's Indian perspective to supersede all others. As the native informant, Jackson is able to interact with the reader in a manner that both deconstructs and sustains the cultural space between "us" and "them" by capitalizing on the storyteller/listener dynamic. This process of conveying knowledge, be it fact or legend, is fundamental to the role of the native informant. In this way, Alexie's "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" contributes to the already fascinating discourse surrounding the definition or redefinition of the Native American (or *Indian*) experience as it is viewed in a contemporary and culturally sensitive context.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Novels for Students

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

"Night." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

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Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

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