

Ten Little Indians

SHERMAN ALEXIE

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Is there a more famous American Indian in all the United States than Sherman Alexie? I don't think so. In July 1998, he appeared on PBS with President Clinton and representatives of various ethnic groups in a round-table discussion on race in the United States. He was the prime mover behind the movie *Smoke Signals*, a film that was popular with both the public and the critics. He is a regular participant at poetry slams, was the subject of a *New York Times Magazine* article, and has been heard on public radio several times.

In the summer of 2003, I was able to attend one of his readings/performances, at the Wisconsin State Historical Society on the University of Wisconsin campus in Madison. This building, which has one of John Muir's elaborate hand-carved clockwork contraptions in the lobby, also has a 300-seat auditorium, the tickets for which were all snapped up in advance. Another 300 or more people showed up anyway, and so a follow-up appearance at the student union across the street was quickly arranged.

In the mid 1990s, I attended another reading/signing in Madison, with the same bookstore sponsor, also by an eminent writer from the Northwest: National Book Award winner Barry Lopez. Lopez writes prose as sharp and hard as an obsidian arrowhead, and moves with apparent ease from one genre to another—from long nonfiction to nature essays, to short stories and even children's books. His most recent collection of short fiction, *Light Action in the Caribbean*, has a number of stories that are about as good as they get. But the Lopez gathering at the cozy bookstore in literate and liberal Madison drew a much smaller crowd. The difference? Alexie isn't only a top-notch writer, he is also a cultural star.

Alexie's present book, *Ten Little Indians*, contains nine stories (perhaps the numerical difference results from an early autobiographical sketch called "One Little Indian"). All nine are insightful and original, but three are simply superb. It's an old rhetorical device to start with the second best component, sandwich lesser ones in the middle, and save the best one or two until last. In my estimation, *Ten Little Indians* follows that pattern.

The opening piece, "The Search Engine," is about a young Indian woman student named Corliss who "believed in (or wanted to) the endless nature of human possibility." Corliss loves books so much she wants to be "buried in a coffin filled with used paperbacks," and has "never met one human being more interesting to her than a good book." An incurable romantic, she grew up on the Spokane reservation where higher education was regarded with suspicion. Corliss' traits not only make her very different, they also give rise to various conflicts.

Corliss, however, is quite stubborn about her own pursuits. When she finds a 30-year-old book of poetry by another Spokane, she is fascinated that no one seems ever to have heard of the author, Harlan Atwater, a mystery that serves

only to turn her search into a quest (and therein lies the title with its ironic pun). After a lengthy search, she finds first a published interview with Atwater and later the former poet himself, now a forklift driver who attends to the aged white couple who adopted and raised him. Because people wanted him to be a "real" Indian, he pretended that he was brought up on the reservation. This deception, plus thinking that he was too ordinary to be a poet, caused him to give up writing.

Feeling ordinary is a sentiment that Corliss secretly harbors about herself. She meets with Atwater in a used bookstore and, after a long, important conversation, they go their separate ways. Corliss leaves Atwater's book on the store shelf for someone else to find, and in the final words of the story, "left the bookstore and began her small journey home." The reader is left with the sense that this journey home is less literal than metaphoric. In her search, Corliss discovers more about herself than she does about the lost poet. Her growth and self-discovery will, I think, continue.

The second-to-the-last story, "What You Pawn I Will Redeem," is indeed about redemption, but of a funny, sad, and poignant kind. The narrator, one Jackson Jackson, is a homeless Spokane Indian who now wanders the streets of Seattle alone or with a couple of similar compatriots. Jackson became a homeless street person not by walking out of relationships but, as he says, "Piece by piece, I disappeared. And I've been disappearing ever since."

While walking past a pawnshop one day, he sees in the window what he instinctively knows to be his grandmother's powwow dancing regalia, even though he has seen it before only in photographs. After identifying the regalia to both his and the pawnbroker's satisfaction, he learns that to retrieve the outfit he has to raise \$999 in 24 hours. Although he is \$994 short, he nonetheless sets out on a quest to redeem the items. But things being what they are, as soon as Jackson raises some money he spends it on food and cheap wine for himself and his friends. Throughout his hapless, and apparently hopeless, quest, he retains his generosity and good humor, and always finds kindness in people—including a white cop who probably saves his life. After the incident, Jackson cracks a joke and the policeman says, "I don't know how you guys do it ... I just picked your ass off the railroad tracks, and you're making jokes." The story ends with a surprising but wholly satisfying twist. It is nothing less than a coup.

The book concludes with a nearly novella-length story called "Whatever Happened to Frank Snake Church?" The 39-year-old title character had been a high school basketball phenom, kind of an Indian Rabbit Angstrom. But he peaked early and was unable to play college ball. After having a vision of his father's death, he decides to quit his Forest Service job. Sardonic humor once again abounds. When Frank finds his father very much alive, he tells him of his vision. "You're supposed to be dead. I saw you dead." His father replies, "You have blurry vision." Frank hires a personal trainer whom he tells, "I want to be good again," and sets out to regain his lost skills. He does become quite good again, but his is a roller-

coaster quest with highs and lows.

One of Frank's basketball encounters involves playing Horse with an older black man known as Preacher. Preacher taunts Frank by saying, "You used to be Frank the Snake, Frank the Hot Dog, but now you're just a plain Oscar Mayer wiener." By the end of the story Frank Snake is neither a wiener nor chopped liver. He is U.S. Prime—as is his creator, Sherman Alexie. An important difference is that Alexie, while an excellent writer, has not yet peaked. ■

REVIEWER: **Jim Grinnell** is a writer who lives in De Kalb, IL.