

Joelle Fraser

AN INTERVIEW WITH SHERMAN ALEXIE

On a rare sunny Seattle day, Sherman Alexie's manager offered me my choice of soda or bottled water and gave me a tour of Alexie's three-room office, a good-looking rooftop space with a deck that overlooks the tony community of Bellevue. Some worlds may contrast more starkly with Alexie's boyhood home on the Coeur d'Alene Indian Reservation, but not many.

Alexie arrived late, comfortable in cotton, hair pulled back in a loose ponytail. As we introduced ourselves his smile hid a sense of weary obligation—this poet, fiction writer and filmmaker has many projects to promote. Though he became quite friendly after a few questions, at first his manner seemed to suggest, "Let's get to it."

JF: You're called "the future of American fiction" by *The New Yorker*.

SA: It's because they needed a brown guy. They had five of us I think. A guy asked me how do you feel about there being so few white men on the (1996) *Granta* list. I said there were 11 out of 20: how could that be 'few'? And 16 overall were white! I got all sorts of grief for being on the *Granta* list by the way. Like I didn't belong on it—

JF: You only had *Reservation Blues* then. What about the response to *The New Yorker* list?

SA: Everybody's really happy with it.

JF: You've earned your place?

SA: Yeah I guess. I'm an important brown guy now. (Laughs). Being different helps. I'm not going to deny that it helps a lot. I mean the work has to be good, but the fact that I'm different makes it more attractive to magazines.

JF: So you grant that?

SA: Oh yeah. I'm a firm believer in affirmative action—nobody unqualified ever gets a job through affirmative action. Maybe less qualified, but not unqualified. Certainly I might get on lists or get opportunities because I'm different, because I'm Indian.

JF: And it doesn't bother you?

SA: No! Hell no! Reparation. (Laughs). Nobody white is getting anything because they're white. It doesn't happen in the literary world, never, never once has a white guy gotten more because he's white. But then you have that

cabal of New York writers, young good-looking New York literary boys, and they have their own sense of entitlement. I'm not anywhere near that stuff.

JF: How did people react to your story in *The New Yorker*, "The Toughest Indian in the World?"

SA: When I wrote it I honestly didn't think about the reaction people would have to it. It's funny—it really brings up the homophobia in people. When a straight guy like me writes about a homoerotic experience in the first person with a narrator who is very similar to me—I could see people dying to ask me if it was autobiographical. They always ask in regard to everything else, but no one's asked me about that story. In the Seattle paper here, the critic called it a "graphic act of homosexuality" and I thought "graphic?" There's nothing graphic about it at all. It was three sentences. He talked about me being a "literary rabble-rouser" again.

JF: Someone else called you a similar name—the young rouser, the young something from Seattle—

SA: Oh yeah—Larry McMurtry. Rambler. "The Young Rambler from Seattle." Yeah I liked that one. It made me feel like I was in a bar brawl.

JF: You've said of writers who aren't Indian, like McMurtry, that they shouldn't write about Indians.

SA: Not exactly.

JF: Clarify that.

SA: At the beginning it was probably that but it's changed. People can write whatever they want—people accuse me of censorship when I say these things. But what I really want to say is that we should be talking about these books, written about Indians by non-Indians, honestly and accurately. I mean, they're outsider books. They're colonial books. Barbara Kingsolver's novels are colonial literature. Larry McMurtry's books are colonial literature. These are books by members of the privileged, of the powerful, writing about the culture that has been colonized. This is no different than Nadine Gordimer, who's a colonial writer, and she would call herself that.

So I think this illusion of democracy in the country—it's the best country in the world—but this illusion allows artists to believe that it isn't a colony. When it still is. The United States and South Africa: the only difference is about 50 years, not even that much. And people forget that. So when McMurtry does what he does, he thinks he's being democratic, but he's actually being colonial. I wish we could talk about the literature in those terms, beyond the quality of it, but actually talking about in terms of "hey this person doesn't know this—it's completely a work of imagination."

JF: How does this compare to, say, occupying the other gender?

SA: (Laughs). Oh that's the same thing.

JF: You've done that, and written from a white person's view, too.

SA: Well, I know a lot more about being white—because I have to, I live in the white world. A white person doesn't live in the Indian world. I have to be white every day.

JF: What about your female characters?

SA: I'm not a woman. (Laughs). Never was. I think often my characters, outside of Spokane Indian guys, are often a little bit thin because I have a difficult time getting into them and getting to know them. My white people often end up being sort of “cardboardy”—which is thematically all right—but it isn't necessarily my original purpose. I just get uncomfortable writing about them.

JF: Really. Is that something you're trying to develop and work on?

SA: Yeah, I'm trying to become a better writer. I think in the end I'll get closer to that. And about women's experience—I'm better than most male writers. They see the Madonna-whore—it's incredible: these progressive, liberal, intelligent, highly-educated men are writing complex, diverse, wonderful male characters in the same book where the female characters are like women in a 3 a.m. movie on Showtime.

JF: You've said having come from a matriarchal culture gives you more insight.

SA: I think it helps. And I give my stuff to the women around me. 'Does this work?' I spend my whole life around women—I should know something. If I don't know it, I ask. It has to be a conscious effort. It's too easy to fall back on stereotypes and myths, and I think that's what most writers do about Indians and what most men do when they write about women.

JF: So you're conscious of it . . .

SA: I'm conscious of the fact that I mythologize. (Laughs). I'm still a caveman. I just like to think of myself as a sensitive caveman.

JF: Going back to your growth as a writer, as you develop and gain facility—you're getting better technically, for example—do you fear that you'll lose some of that tension that comes from being a struggling new writer?

SA: My friend Donna, who helps me edit, we talk about this. When I first started, my grammar was atrocious, but she said that often people don't care when so-called “unprivileged people's” grammar is atrocious because it's part of the “voice.” And they account for it in that way.

JF: In fact readers might think it's "appropriate."

SA: When in fact it's just bad grammar. It's the result of a poor education. But I'm better now. Most of my sentence fragments now are intentional. (Laughs).

JF: What did your parents expect you to be?

SA: Oh God. Alive. In their fondest hopes. I'm the first member of my family—that's extended—who's graduated from college. No one else has since. I was a very bright kid; I was a little prodigy in all sorts of ways. There were friends and family telling me I was going to be a doctor or a lawyer. Nobody predicted I would be doing this, including me.

JF: So you didn't have a sense of yourself as a writer until college?

SA: Right. I wrote and I loved reading, and brown guys—you're supposed to be Jesus, saving the world with law or medicine.

JF: And with writing can you save the world?

SA: You can do more than a doctor or a lawyer can. If I were a doctor nobody would be inviting me to talk to reservations. I'd be a different person. Writers can influence more people.

JF: Can poetry change the direction of society?

SA: I don't know. A lot of people are reading my poems and other people's poems because of me. This 55-year-old white guy at a reading said, 'I never got poems, I hated them, and then I read your book and liked them, and now I'm reading all sorts of poems.' And that's great. If I can be a doorway . . .

JF: Paula Gunn Allen says of Native Americans, "We are the land." What do you think of that?

SA: I don't buy it. For one thing, environmentalism is a luxury. Just like being a vegetarian is a luxury. When you have to worry about eating—you're not going to be worried about where the food's coming from, or who made your shoes. Poverty, whether planned or not planned, is a way of making environmentalism moot. Even this discussion is a luxury.

JF: This interview.

SA: You and me—doing this. Besides, Indians have no monopoly on environmentalism. That's one of the great myths. But we were subsistence livers. They're two different things. Environmentalism is a conscious choice and subsistence is the absence of choice. We had to use everything to survive. And now that we've been assimilated and colonized and we have luxuries and excesses, we're just as wasteful as other people.

JF: But the myth persists with contemporary Indians.

SA: Part of it is that we had a land-based theology, but all theologies are land-based. Christianity is land-based in its beginnings. I think in some ways Indians embrace it because it's a cultural or racial self-esteem issue. We're trying to find something positive that differentiates us from the dominant culture. And the best way to do that—because the US is so industrial and so wasteful—is to say, 'OK we're environmentalists' and that separates us. When in fact, we're just a part of the US as well, and the wastefulness. The average everyday Indian—he's not an environmentalist—he could give a shit. Just like the average white American. I grew up with my aunts and uncles and cousins throwing their cans out the window.

JF: How does this tie in with literature?

SA: You throw in a couple of birds and four directions and corn pollen and it's Native American literature, when it has nothing to do with the day-to-day lives of Indians. I want my literature to concern the daily lives of Indians. I think most Native American literature is so obsessed with nature that I don't think it has any useful purpose. It has more to do with the lyric tradition of European Americans than it does with indigenous cultures. So when an Indian writes a poem about a tree, I think: 'It's already been done!' And those white guys are going to do it better than you. Nobody can write about a tree like a white guy.

JF: Now why is that?

SA: I don't know. They've been doing it longer.

JF: I'd like to see what you'd write about a tree.

SA: I'm not even interested! I'm interested in people. I think most native literature is concerned with place because they tell us to be. That's the myth. I think it's detrimental. I think most Native American literature is unreadable by the vast majority of Native Americans.

JF: It's not reaching the people.

SA: If it's not tribal, if it's not accessible to Indians, then how can it be Native American literature? I think about it all the time. Tonight I'll look up from the reading and 95% of the people in the crowd will be white. There's something wrong with my not reaching Indians.

JF: But there's the ratio of whites to Indians.

SA: Yeah. But I factor that in and realize there still should be more Indians. I always think that. Generally speaking Indians don't read books. It's not a book culture. That's why I'm trying to make movies. Indians go to movies; Indians own VCRs.

JF: And maybe they'll read your books after.

SA: I'm trying to do that—sneak up on them.

JF: This is what your purpose is—to reach Indian people?

SA: It's selfish in the sense that we haven't had our Emily Dickinson or Walt Whitman; we haven't had our Shakespeare or Denis Johnson or James Wright. We haven't written a book that can compare to the best white novel. But they're out there. There's a kid out there, some boy or girl who will be that great writer, and hopefully they'll see what I do and get inspired by that.

JF: There are many celebrated Indian writers—

SA: But we haven't written anything even close to Faulkner or Hemingway or Jane Austen. Not yet. Of course, white people are about 30, 40 generations ahead in terms of writing. It'll happen. I meet young people all the time, email a lot of kids. The percentage of Indian kids doing some sort of artistic work is much higher than in the general population—painting, drawing, dancing, singing. The creation of art is still an everyday part of our culture, unlike the dominant culture, where art is sort of peripheral. It's not a big leap from a kid who dances to a kid who writes poems. It's the same impulse. It just needs a little push.

JF: What about writing programs, teaching? You don't teach college students, but do you have opinions on MFA programs, on artists' colonies?

SA: I think the summer stuff is just the place where writers go to get laid. You can't teach anything in a week or two.

JF: What about a writing program like Iowa?

SA: Yeah, that's fine. That's dedicated internship. But a summer thing? I've done two, both for friends. People do them because they need the money, and/or to get laid—because they will. Dedicated writers don't go—they're in MFA programs or they already have books. These people who attend the conferences and colonies are very privileged, mostly women, groupie types. They exist so ugly white guys get laid. (Laughs).

JF: Ouch. You don't mind this going out?

SA: No! It's true! Only in rock music and the literary world do you see so many ugly white guys with beautiful women. That says a lot about the women, their character. They're attracted to more than surface.

JF: Will you ever get an academic position?

SA: I hope not. I don't want a real job of any variety. I don't want to have to get up in the morning, that's what it comes down to. Work is not the issue; I don't want the structure.

JF: Is it hard for you to switch hats, from poetry to screenplays to fiction? Some people might say you're trying to find your genre.

SA: It's all the same. It's just telling stories. It's not like I think about it separately.

JF: True, *Smoke Signals* is based on your poems and stories. And then there's your comedy . . .

SA: Yes—you've seen me read: it's funny. There's always been a stand-up element. Now I'm doing real stand-up, and it's amazing the freedom I got when I called it stand-up. I talked about things I would never talk about in a literary world. I can do anything I want, and I get the same amount of laughter when I do stand-up. What I hope to do is bring literary humor to my comedy fans instead of more dick jokes (although I tell my share of dick jokes)—and I want to bring more comedy to the poetry fans.

JF: Is there anyone else doing that?

SA: I don't know. A really good stand-up comic is a poet; it's about the use of language. It can be really poetic. And I like politically conscious comedy.

JF: Like whom?

SA: Bill Hicks, I don't know if you've ever heard of him.

JF: No.

SA: Well, you can have this one. (He gets a CD from a shelf). And Chris Rock. Dennis Miller—smart as hell.

JF: So what's the future for you?

SA: I don't know. I know I'll keep writing poems. That's the constant. I don't know about novels. They're hard. It takes so much concentrated effort. When I'm writing a novel it's pretty much all I can do. I get bored. It takes months. I wrote *Res Blues* in about 4 months, *Indian Killer* in about 6. Movies do the same thing. *Smoke Signals* was 14 months, and that's quick. It's all-encompassing. It feels like I'm going to end up writing poems, short stories and screenplays. I'll continue to work for studios, honestly because it's enormous sums of money and I'll use one project to finance the other. Some people teach; I write screenplays. One's a lot more lucrative.

JF: What about memoir?

SA: In the end you are sort of responsible to the truth, and I like to lie. (Laughs). I'm 33, and as much as I talked about it, it doesn't matter whether you're 25 or 45, not a whole lot has gone on; the journey I'm on is pretty young. And I've rarely read a memoir that wasn't masturbatory. In a sense, you're always mythologizing your life; it's always an effort to make yourself epic. At least in fiction you can lie and sort of justify your delusion about your

“epicness.” But when you’re writing a memoir, you’re trying to make your life epic and it’s not—nobody’s life is. You know that book, *Drinking, A Love Story*? The whole time I’m thinking, “But you kept your job!”

JF: You’ve been sober for years, but in college, how did drinking affect your writing?

SA: I would wake up with stories on the typewriter and not remember writing them.

JF: Did your writing change when you got sober?

SA: I write less about alcohol, less and less and less. You’re an addict—so of course you write about the thing you love most. I loved alcohol the most, loved it more than anybody or anything. That’s what I wrote about. And it certainly accounted for some great writing. But it accounted for two or three years of good writing—it would never account for 20 years of good writing. I would have turned into Charles Bukowski. He wrote 10,000 poems and 10 of them were great.

JF: Frost said a poem is a momentary stay against confusion. Do you feel like that’s true?

SA: (Laughs). That would mean that at some point in my life I didn’t feel confused. He said that with more clarity than I’ve ever had. I’m trying to think—I was writing the other night, I wrote this poem called “One Stick Song,” one I really like at the moment. It relates to stick game, a gambling game. And I can tell you the story of that and we’ll see what it means. I was at my uncle’s wake. I don’t know how other wakes work—

JF: Swedish wakes are wild, everyone’s drunk.

SA: OK there you go, similar. (Laughs). It’s a good time. Someone was talking about this song he’d sing—“one stick song.” You see, you lose sticks in this gambling game, like chips or whatever. You’re down to one stick. And you’re going to lose if you lose it, so this is your most powerful song. You’re desperate. But I hadn’t heard the phrase “one stick song” in years, and as soon as I heard it I thought, oh my God, that’s everything I’ve been doing. “One stick song” is a desperate celebration, a desperate attempt to save yourself: putting everything you have into one song. I looked around the room, thinking, ‘what are these people’s one stick songs? What would it be—what is their one stick, what is the one thing they have left?’

JF: Was that poem meant to be an elegy for the uncle?

SA: It ended up being an elegy for all the family members I’ve lost.

JF: I just heard Mark Doty give a talk on the elegy, about how it can be

applied not only to people but to any loss, and why it needs to both memorialize and make meaning of loss. To what extent do you think you're doing the work of the elegy?

SA: I recently wrote about a man from the reservation who drowned in a mud puddle. He was drunk, alone. How am I supposed to make meaning out of that? And yet I try. That's, in fact, what I'm here to do. You might say that now that man did not die alone.

JF: In your poem, "Capital Punishment," the refrain is "I am not a witness"—but it seems like you are.

SA: I guess a witness is all I am. I think as a writer, you're pretty removed. As much as I talk about tribe or belonging—you don't, really. Writing is a very selfish, individualistic pursuit. So in that sense I'm a witness because I'm not participating.

JF: And literally, you're in Seattle and you're a witness on your old life on the reservation, on the other side of the state.

SA: Yes, I'm not there. And I'm not in the writing world; I'm outside a lot of circles.

JF: Whom do you connect with?

SA: With young people—one of the things I like to do is watch MTV, even though I don't like much of the music, I try to pay attention to what's in their lives.

JF: What's your take on TV?

SA: They've been screaming about the death of literacy for years, but I think TV is the Gutenberg press. I think TV is the only thing that keeps us vaguely in democracy even if it's in the hands of the corporate culture. If you're an artist you write in your time. Moaning about the fact that maybe people read more books a hundred years ago—that's not true. I think the same percentage has always read.

JF: So you're not worried about the culture. You're not worried about video games—

SA: No. Not at all. (Laughs).

JF: A lot of people are, it seems . . .

SA: People also thought Elvis Presley was the end of the world. (Laughs).

JF: You do use a lot of pop cultural references in your work.

SA: It's the cultural currency. Superman means something different to me than it does to a white guy from Ames, Iowa or New York City or L.A. It's a way for us to sit at the same table. I use pop culture like most poets use

Latin. (Laughs). They want to find out how smart they are—or, they think they're being “universal.”

JF: You said once that universality is a misnomer, that it's really a Western sense of the word.

SA: Well, when people say universal they mean white people get it.

JF: What about *Smoke Signals*' universal themes of grief, and loss and coming to terms with death?

SA: That's an appropriate way to talk about it, saying universal themes. But some people call the whole work universal. That's wrong. And even if there are universal themes, it's within a very specific experience and character. And that's what made it good. It was promoted as the first feature film written, directed and produced by Native Americans to ever receive distribution, and reviewers would fall all over themselves trying to discount that, saying 'that doesn't really matter. Who cares.' Of course it matters. It matters, and it's good, and it is what it is precisely because of that specificity. So “universal” is often a way to negate the particularity of a project, of an art. I hate that term; it's insulting. I don't want to be universal.

JF: But do you want to touch people who will say, “I've felt that too”?

SA: Yeah, but the thing is, people always told me their story. They didn't say, 'This made me feel like 100 other people.' The creation is specific and the response is specific. Good art is specific. *Godzilla* is universal. A piece of shit like that plays all over the world. Then you know you got a problem.

JF: Along those lines, I'm wondering about a seeming paradox. You often say during readings and talks that you want to honor your culture's privacy, and yet your work is so public. It seems like you protect it and expose it at the same time. There's a tension created.

SA: Yes, of course there is. One of the ways I've dealt with it is that I don't write about anything sacred. I don't write about any ceremonies; I don't use any Indian songs.

JF: True. You mention sweat lodges but only obliquely. I'm thinking of the image of the old woman in the poem who emerges from the sweat lodge.

SA: Yes, I'm outside the sweat lodge. In *Reservation Blues* I'm in it and I realized I didn't like it. I approach my writing the same way I approach my life. It's what I've been taught and how I behave with regard to my spirituality.

JF: How do you draw the line as to what is off limits?

SA: My tribe drew that line for me a long time ago. It's not written down, but I know it. If you're Catholic you wouldn't tell anybody about the confessional. I feel a heavy personal responsibility, and I accept it, and I honor it. It's part of the beauty of my culture. I've been called fascist a couple of times, at panels. I've censored myself. I've written things that I have since known to be wrong.

JF: What kind of things . . . I guess you can't say.

SA: (Laughs). All I can say is that I've written about cultural events inappropriately.

JF: How did you know?

SA: The people involved told me. After considering it, I realized they were right. In a few instances. Not every instance, but in a few. I can't take them out of what they're in, but I'm not going to republish them, or perform them in public, no anthologizing: they've died for me. There are Indian writers who write about things they aren't supposed to. They know. They'll pay for it. I'm a firm believer in what people call 'karma.' Even some of the writing I really admire, like Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*, steps on all sorts of sacred toes. I wouldn't go near that kind of writing. I'd be afraid of the repercussions. I write about a drunk in a bar, or a guy who plays basketball.

JF: So the only flak you get is from individuals who say, "I think you're making fun of me." Do you try to soothe things over?

SA: Some people are unsoothable. But I'm a nice enough guy, and I think people know that. If I weren't pissing people off I wouldn't be doing my job. I just want to piss off the right people. I try not to pick on the people who have less power than I. It's one of the guidelines of my life. And if I have, then I feel badly about it. I try to make amends.

JF: You're only in your early thirties—and you have 12 books and two screenplays behind you. What was it like to have written so much so young and yet feel like you need to be a better writer? Do you feel like some work came out too soon?

SA: Everything, everything! *Reservation Blues*—ooh, ooh. I'm working on the screenplay now, and I see where I could be so much better. What I could have done. I can tell you what happened. In *Reservation Blues*, the original impulse was that I can't sing, and I wanted to write a novel about somebody who could. Everyone wants to be a rock star. You get to date supermodels (it's a joke!). With *Indian Killer* it was because I was sitting at Washington

State with frat guys in the back row who I wanted to kill. And I would fantasize about murder.

JF: What were they doing that made you want to kill them?

SA: Just being white. Just drunk on their privilege, essentially. Showing up late, disrupting the class in all sorts of small ways that all added up to my thinking, 'I want to kill them.'

JF: So you write books about people you want to be.

SA: Umm. Do I want to be a murderer? (Laughs). I don't think so, but we all want to kill somebody. It's fantasy. Well I guess then my next novel's about my love affair with Helen Hunt (Laughs).

JF: One of the things you said is that poetry equals anger and imagination. Do you feel like a lot of the power of your earlier work came from being a younger man full of passion and anger, and do you ever worry about that lessening as you get older and things get easier for you? That is, are you still angry, and has it changed if you are?

SA: I could respond to that in two ways: the richest black man in the country still has a hard time getting a taxi in New York at midnight. But for me, personal success or personal privilege—I have a tremendous amount of it now—I mean I have my own damned office. How many writers have that? Just to manage my life I had to hire somebody. And I'm rich. Not by Steve Forbes standards, but by Indian standards I'm the Indian Steve Forbes. I bought a TV last night because I wanted one for the office.

JF: Are you still amazed by that?

SA: Oh yeah. I just laugh. When I had no money, and a great book came out, I couldn't get it. I had to wait. I love the idea that I have hardcover books here and at home that I haven't read yet. That's how I view that I'm rich. I have hardcover books I may never read. (Laughs).

But even though I have success and privilege, my cousins don't. My tribe doesn't. I still get phone calls in the middle of the night—about deaths and car wrecks. I've lost uncles and cousins to violence or to slow deaths by neglect and abuse and poverty. I could try to walk away from that, to separate, but I don't. Every time I drive downtown Seattle I see dozens of homeless Indians. I would be callous beyond belief not to feel that, not to know I have cousins who are homeless in cities out there. So even if it's not happening to me directly, it's certainly happening to my family, and I have to pick up the phone. I'm incredibly privileged when I'm sitting at a typewriter, but once I get up and out of that role, I'm an Indian.