

*Smoke Signals* - trailer

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7XYEE-TBJIM>

(2:03 min)

## SHERMAN ALEXIE



The Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian Sherman Alexie has made an impact, not only on contemporary Native-American literature, but also for Native Americans and the process of accepting and dealing with their cultural and historical heritage along with other Native American writers as for example Leslie Marmon Silko.

Alexie has achieved numerous awards for his poetry and his fiction. He also actively works for institutes and programs that help other Native-American writers as adviser or teacher or mentor. Born with hydrocephalus, water in the brain, he not only survived against the odds, he clearly showed an incredible sense for reading and writing at an extremely early age. As a child, he was looked upon as a "freak," he says in an interview at KCTS9 who was "bullied quite a bit." "I was labeled an apple early on, red on the outside and white on the inside," he says. Early on he saw the limitations of the reservation to his development and education and sought out of the reservation to attend high school even though that meant being the only Native-American in his school. He published his first works of poetry shortly after graduating from Washington State University in 1987: *The Business of Fancydancing* (1991) and *I Would Steal Horses* (1992). As many of his characters, and many Native-Americans, Alexie had a drinking problem. In contrast to many of his characters, though, he managed to overcome these problems early on.

Show part of interview at KCTS9 from youtube.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lo9vRHYMiFM> 6 minutes in total.

1. "Everyone feels like an outsider..." where he talks about his young adult readers (17:30-19:50)
2. "The A-word" where he talks about alcoholism and how he was symbolically born like a storyteller when his sister died. (19:50-23:20)

## PETER PAN 2009

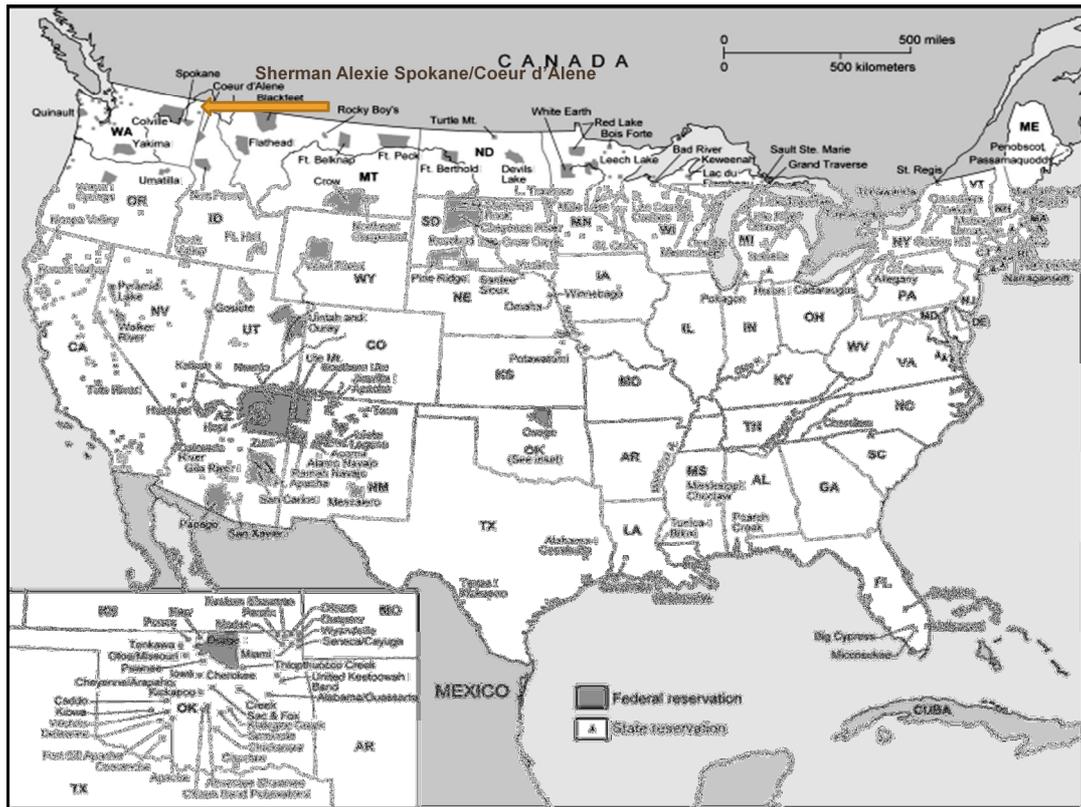
### ✦ Peter Pan 2009

Årets Peter Pan pris går till *Den absolut sanna historien om mitt liv som halvtidsindian* av Sherman Alexie. Översättning: Ingela Jernberg, Rabén & Sjögren.

Berättelsen är hjärtskärande sorglig men samtidigt varm och hysteriskt rolig och bygger på den hyllade författaren och komikern Sherman Alexies egna upplevelser. Kryddad med Ellen Fornays underbara illustrationer i seriestil. Junior, 14 år, är den nördigaste indianen i hela Spokane-reservatet. Han läspar, stammar, är född med vattenskalle och sitter helst av allt hemma och ritat serier. En dag får Junior besök av sin lärare, Mister P, som har ett enda råd att ge honom: Åk härifrån, så fort du kan. Mister P har tvingats bevittna allt för många begåvade barn i reservatet som bara fått lära sig en sak: hur man ger upp. Trots att nästan alla på reservatet ser Junior som en svikare och förrädare, lyder han rådet och börjar på en helvit medelklasskola 22 miles bort. De enda indianerna där är han själv och skolmaskoten ... (Kilde: Peter Pan Prisen Sverige: <http://ibby.se/priser-peter-pan/>)

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007) is an autobiographical young adult novel. It was his first major international, commercial success. The novel is a heartbreaking, hilarious, and beautifully written story of a young Native American boy who attempts to break free from the life he was destined to live.

In this novel he specifically writes for a young audience. The story is told from the perspective of the Native American teenager Arnold Spirit Jr., better known as Junior. The story is about his life on the Spokane Indian Reservation and how he leaves the reservation to go to an all-white high school off the reservation in the town called Reardon. The story is auto-biographical and deals with issues such as racism and poverty and how to find a way to incorporate the Native American tradition into an identity which is also American. Alexie is very humble in his writing for a young audience and realizes not only that young adult readers outnumber adult readers, but also the much larger impact he may have on them. He recognizes teenagers as extremely passionate and devoted readers and often receives e-mails from teenagers who recognize themselves and find strength in his work. Alexie says in the interview with KCTSP that he writes about being an outsider and that he believes that is what young people recognize in his writing: "Almost every 16 year old feels like a freak."



Source: Native American Facts For Kids. [http://www.bigorin.org/coeur\\_kids.htm](http://www.bigorin.org/coeur_kids.htm)

The Spokane and the Coeur d'Alene are Native American people in the northeastern portion of the U.S. state of Washington.

Originally the Coeur d'Alene tribe roamed an area of over 16,000 km<sup>2</sup> of grass-covered hills, prairie, forested mountains, lakes, and rivers in northern Idaho, eastern Washington and western Montana. Successive government acts in the 1800s cut their property to 1,400 km<sup>2</sup> near Plummer, south of the town of Coeur d'Alene. The Spokane Indian Reservation includes the Spokane River and the city of Spokane. The Spokane tribe once sprawled out over 12,000 km<sup>2</sup> of land mostly over western Washington. The territory they live on now consists of 623 km<sup>2</sup>, of which they possess only ten percent; the rest is held by the government.

The Coeur d'Alenes/Spokanes constructed permanent villages for the winter by the river for fishing and huts in the mountains for gathering. The first white men to contact the Coeur d'Alenes and the Spokanes were explorers and fur traders. A trading post known as Spokane House was constructed near Spokane and Little Spokane Rivers around 1810. Samuel Johnson, the first missionary to visit the Spokane, arrived in 1836.

As with other tribes, the Coeur d'Alene and the Spokanes suffered from introduced diseases including smallpox, syphilis and the flu, and land-grabbing brought by white settlers and exacerbated by lack of legal controls to prevent injustice. Some consequences of the movement of the white men were the destruction of the burial grounds and ancient villages, the suppression of original Indian languages and cultures, and the raping of native women. The tribes made a number of agreements with the federal governments in the late 1800's.

**WHAT LANGUAGE DO THEY SPEAK?**

**HOW ARE THE TWO RESERVATIONS ORGANIZED?**

Source: Native American Facts For Kids. [http://www.bigorrin.org/coeur\\_kids.htm](http://www.bigorrin.org/coeur_kids.htm)

***What language do the Coeur d'Alene Indians speak?***

Almost all Coeur d'Alene and the Spokane people speak English today, but some, especially elders, also speak their native language which belongs to the Interior Salishan family and is closely related to the Okanagan and others in the area. It is a complicated language with many sounds that don't exist in English. If you'd like to know an easy Coeur d'Alene word, *qhest* is a friendly greeting in Coeur d'Alene. It rhymes with "best," and the *qh* is pronounced similar to the guttural "ch" in German "ach."

Spokane name means "children of the sun" or "Sun People". In their language, the Coeur d'Alene members call themselves *Schitsu'umsh*, meaning *The Discovered People* or *Those Who Are Found Here*. Early French fur traders in the late 1700s or early 1800s gave them their French name, *Cœur d'Alène* which means *Heart of an Owl*, probably because they were sharp traders.

***How are the two reservations organized?***

The Coeur d'Alenes and the Spokanes live on reservations, which is land that belongs to them and is under their control. The reservations have their own government, laws, police, and services, just like a small country. However, they are also US citizens and must obey American law. In the past, each tribe was led by a chief who was chosen by a tribal council of elders, clan leaders, and other important men. The chiefs were highly respected, but didn't have a lot of political power. They had to listen to the tribal council most of the time. Today, tribes are still ruled by tribal councils, but council members are elected by all the people and can include women as well as men.

## WHAT KINDS OF STORIES DO NATIVE AMERICANS TELL?

- ✘ “In the Pueblo tribe the people are communal people, it is an egalitarian communal society. The education of the children is done within the community, this is in the old times before the coming of the Europeans. Each adult works with every child, children belong to everybody and the way of teaching is to tell stories. All information, scientific, technological, historical, religious, is put into narrative form. It is easier to remember that way.”

Leslie Marmon Silko

There are lots of traditional Native American legends and fairy tales. Storytelling is very important to the Indian culture. This is because they are a communal people who believe that all kinds of information can be taught through stories because it is easier to remember that way.

### Storytelling Theory and Practice

Source: Brian Sturm. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFC-URW6wku&feature=fvw> Professor Brian

I'd also like to talk a little about how a story can organize the various kinds of information that we have. Telling stories is a way of organizing information and perhaps the most powerful way. Stories and storytelling is a way of thinking about information. Now, what exactly is a story? A story is something that has a beginning, middle and an end. But stories are a bit deeper than that. It's about character. It's about sequence of events, usually. It's about a progression of things. And it's a way of tying the different pieces of information together to a unified whole. And it's that kind of approach, when you think of information as dots on a screen and a story as a way of connecting those dots, with storytelling you think of these dots on the screen. And then if you connect them in one way, you'll end up with a particular kind of picture or as if you connect them in a different way, you get a different kind of picture. So it's how we connect the dots of information that leads to the kinds of stories we create and the kind of spin we put on those stories. But it's even deeper than that. Storytelling is not so much about plot; it's not so much about character. Storytelling is really a way to convey emotions and build community. And that's fundamentally what telling a story and listening to a story is all about.

As we tell a story, it's not usually a canned performance. It's something that is created on the spot as we go along. We have a rough outline in mind, but as we tell the story, it unfolds as we get feedback from the audience. So it's not a memorized presentation. And it's really that emotional power of the story that we're trying to convey as storytellers, and often as teachers as well. We want to get to the deep feeling, that deep power that underlies the information that we are trying to share. That's what makes it persuasive. So it's about taking all of these separate bits of information and weaving them together. Explained by a metaphor, as metaphors figures very strongly in stories, a story then may be the way in which we weave together the disparate pieces. So if the information is the thread, the actual garments, the cloak which we end up with, are the actual stories. So with that in mind, with the idea that a story can "cloak" the information and thereby make it more accessible, I'd like to tell a story. It's a Jewish story about two beautiful, beautiful women. And these two women, once, long, long ago, lived in a small house at the end of a village. The two women were exceedingly beautiful. One day they were having a slight discussion and the discussion became an argument about who was the most beautiful and who would be the most accepted by the villagers. It began to get really heated and so finally they decided to have a contest. And the contest was that they would both, one at the time, walk through the village. And then they would see who had the most friends. And so they agreed. Truth went first. Truth walked out, and as she went down the central village street, the people, who were out on their lawns, began to ease on back into their houses. Some of them, who were up in the windows, closed the shutters. And by the time Truth had gotten to the end of the village, there were very few people left outside. So she thought to herself: "I'm going to loose this contest! What can I do to make myself even more attractive?" She thought: "There's really only one thing left to do." So she disrobed. She took off her clothes and she stood there completely naked. Then she walked back through the village, thinking that now, people would flock from their houses to see her. But, indeed, it was the opposite. All of the remaining people went back into their houses and they closed their windows. And she eventually ended up walking back all the way by herself.

Well, she got back and she met her companion and her companion was Story. And Story said: "Well, how did it go?" Truth said: "I can't believe it. There was no one there!" And Story said: "One moment, let me try." So Story left and she walked along. And as she walked through the village, all the people began to come out of their houses. The windows opened and they came down and into the streets and they began to talk and mingle and talk amongst themselves. It was a wonderful gathering. She walked all the way to the end, people streaming behind her. She turned around and walked back and the entire village gathered in the center as she walked through.

Well, she got back and Truth was quite humble and she said: "I'm sorry, I've lost the contest and I realize now that Story is more powerful than Truth." Story walked up to her and she said: "It's not that Story is more powerful! It's just that nobody likes the truth. Especially they don't like the naked truth! If what you need is to get across your point, what you need is the mental of Story." So Story took her beautiful, multicolored cloak and draped around the shoulders of Truth. And that time, when Truth went back into the village, the people came out because now they could hear what she had to say.

That's a story from the Israeli tradition, the Jewish tradition. So what, now, does story allow us to do? It allows us to say what we need to say without appearing didactic, without appearing overly persuasive. It sort of "cloaks" what we want to have heard in a beautifully and accessible way. And so we understand the deeper meanings of story and the deeper meanings of information because of the shell that we put around it, this narrative shell. It also, if it's told well, it allows you to enter a different space. And that's one of the most profound things with storytelling. It seems to transport us. It takes us on a journey. It takes us to another place, a different place. It's a place that J. R. R. Tolkien calls "The Secondary World". Authors try to create this world that lives while the author is creating it. And once it's done, it evaporates and goes somewhere, we don't know where.

But while it's there, it's amazingly powerful. It's very engaging, very immersive. It's a struggle to get in sometimes, but once you let go, you tumble into the story, you fall into the story, and you're pulled into it. It's not so much that we agree to this, that we allow it to happen. There's actually an effort. If we work and get involved on our own part in a story, at some point the story takes over and it pulls us along. So it's almost like a push to begin with and a pull thereafter that makes story listening so engaging and immersive. And this other place, this "Secondary World", is what authors try to create when they write, because if you don't have the stories "you don't have anything" (Ceremony, 1977: 1).

*I remember a place  
Where I'd never been  
Across time and space and sea.*

*I hear Besta's voice  
Trembling with magic  
Bringing that place to me.*

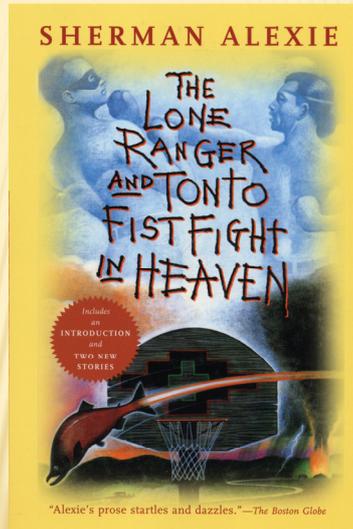
*(Faythe Dyrud Thuren)*

Storytelling, then, is very important in all Native American cultures. Sherman Alexie is a modern storyteller, he is a storyteller with a firm belief in the power of storytelling. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, from which the story "This Is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona" is taken, is about relationships between people and these characters struggle to find a strong modern identity.

Alexie's writing is tragic and funny at the same time, he is a comic and ironic storyteller. Alexie recognizes that the stereotype view of Native Americans has resulted in a collective identity crisis for many Native Americans because: "You can never be as strong as a stereotypical warrior, as godly as a stereotypical shaman, or as drunk as a drunken Indian" (Alexie: Story-Smoke). Alexie integrates elements from both Western forms and tribal storytelling to create a modern Native storytelling voice and he uses an old oral storytelling tradition to create a modern written storytelling form. He does that through funny, exaggerated and ironic descriptions of Native American people and their stories.

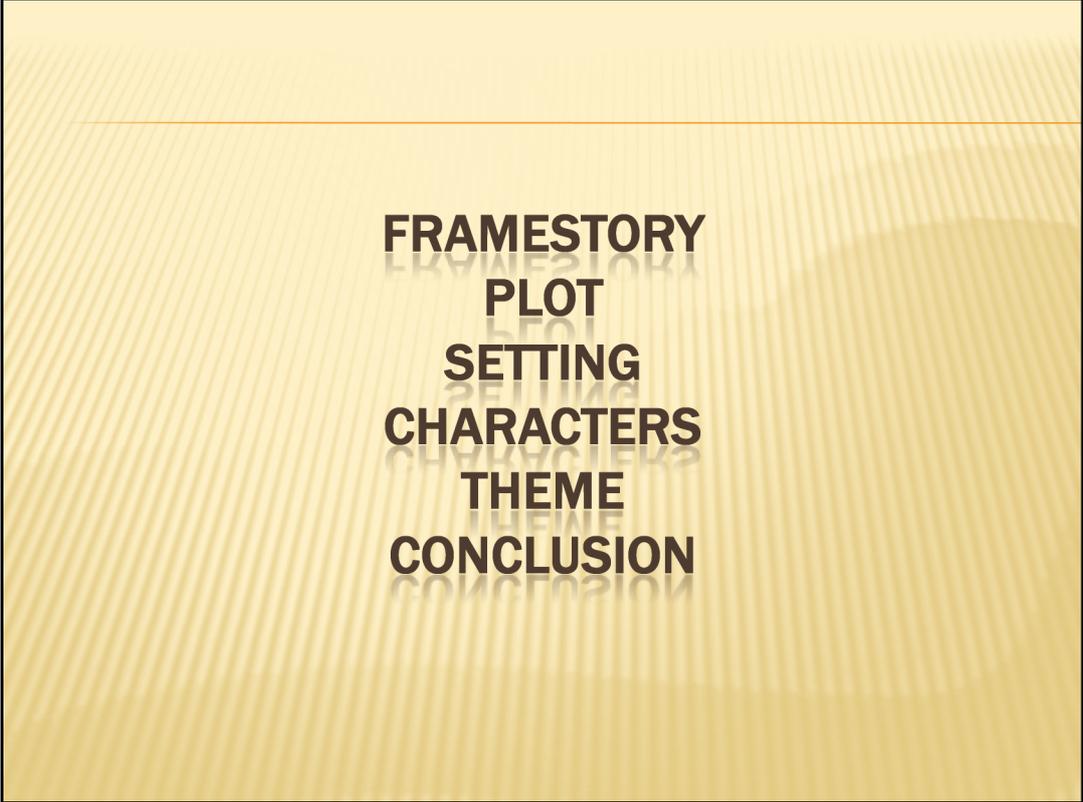
Growing up on the Spokane Reservation, his father Coeur d'Alene and his mother Spokane, he lived a very typical reservation life. His mother sobered up when he was seven and had several random jobs, but the family was poor and lived in government houses. In reflecting on his many health problems early in life, he acknowledges that his many problems may have made him stronger and gave him a very strong will to survive. His sister died in a house fire where alcohol played a large role. In the movie *Smoke Signals*, based mainly on "This Is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona" the character Thomas Builds-the-Fire is saved in a house fire in which his parents died and born like a storyteller. Alexie sees his sister's death as a symbol of himself being born as a storyteller.

## THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS TO SAY PHOENIX, ARIZONA



“This Is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona,” is about two young Native American men on the Spokane Reservation in Washington, U. S. The story is neatly structured around news of Victor's father's death in Arizona and the task of retrieving his ashes, old pickup truck, and modest savings and returning north. Several years after it was written it provided most of the plot underpinnings of Alexie's first movie, *Smoke Signals*.

The most apparent conflict in the story is the inter-personal conflict between Thomas Builds-the-Fire and Victor. As children, they got into a fistfight. Later it is revealed that Victor was just drunk and angry. As adults, though, they often see each other on the reservation but they would rarely speak to each other since Victor has learned to ignore Thomas. Although not every conflict has an immediate solution, Sherman Alexie does maintain a sense of hopefulness and the possibility of a new beginning. Due to Victor's internal frustration, he projects his anger onto Thomas. Thomas is comfortable with himself while Victor is not. Yet, the conflict between Thomas and Victor leads to a more subtle struggle - the conflict that Victor has within himself. Victor cannot even turn to the Tribal Council for adequate financial assistance to retrieve his father's remains. His self-bitterness partially stems from the deeply embedded conflict that Native Americans face in European or "American" society. Nevertheless, Victor does agree to ride with Thomas to Arizona and this is the first step to resolving the conflict. During the trip, Victor apologizes for the fight and begins to accept Thomas for who he is. As a favor to Thomas for his company and help on the journey, Victor agrees to hear just one more story.



**FRAMESTORY**  
**PLOT**  
**SETTING**  
**CHARACTERS**  
**THEME**  
**CONCLUSION**

**FRAME STORY:**

**PLOT:** "This Is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," is about two young Native American men who live on the Spokane Reservation in Washington, U. S. The story is neatly structured around news of Victor's father's death in Arizona and the task of retrieving his ashes, and metaphorically the lost father for Victor, his old pickup truck and modest savings and returning north. It is this goal of the journey that drives the plot, but through the flashbacks are the stereotyped descriptions of Victor, the stoic warrior, and Thomas, the storytelling shaman who "was a storyteller that nobody wanted to listen to" (62) presented.

**SETTING:** Late 1900s Spokane Reservation, western Washington + Phoenix, Arizona.

**CHARACTERS:** Victor and Thomas Builds-the-Fire, around 20 years old.

**THEME: "Personal hurricanes"** is introduced in the very first paragraph: "Victor hadn't seen his father in a few years, only talked to him on the telephone once or twice, but still there was a genetic pain, which was soon to be pain as real and immediate as a broken bone" (59). This is a story about a pain on a personal level but also personal pain in general and the conflict a person may have within him- or herself because of broken relationships and loss of important people in one's life and the identity crisis this may cause. **"Storytelling":** Although Victor had a problematic relationship with his father, as well as with Thomas, part of their trip to Arizona involves Thomas recounting experiences with Victor's father and telling other stories. This creates a sort of modern storehouse of new tales, with one frame story in which there are many flashbacks, like memories or visions. The flashbacks serve to provide information of the characters history and explain their actions.

**CONCLUSION:** It is the journey that drives the plot, but through the flashbacks we hear about how these characters' struggle, both in relationships between each other and with themselves. Thomas continues to tell his stories throughout the story as both stereotype image of an old shamanistic tradition and an ironic commentator on it. Even though Thomas's mother died in childbirth, and he was raised by his grandmother, he knows the loss that Victor feels in losing even an absent father. The story concludes with the two young men back in Washington State. As they part after their long journey, Victor gives one-half of his father's ashes to Thomas, and both men plan to return the ashes to the river at Spokane Falls, continuing to add chapters to the stories which Thomas has already been telling and retelling.



How Do We Forgive Our Fathers – Dick Lourie

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QutfN2wb1wc>

(2:02 min)