

**Big Vibrators, Bums, and Big Explosions: Danger and Reward in Teaching Sherman Alexie**

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**Abstract**

The short stories, novels, and poetry of Native American author Sherman Alexie provide his readers with a host of controversial topics. Unafraid to tackle race or religion, Alexie also pushes sexual boundaries and the social conventions surrounding them. Nothing is sacred. He does not refrain from offering the spectacle of the homeless or alcoholic Indian, thus drawing sharp criticism from Native American scholars. And yet, this author provides the college teacher with the necessary resources in *Ten Little Indians* to bring his stories into the classroom: humor, satire, and clever narrative strategies. In doing so, he provides rich material to facilitate the development of critical thinking in literature classrooms. Functioning almost as an intermediary for the college teacher who dares to assign him, Alexie weaves resources for defusing potential strife and discord in the classroom directly into his literature.

When students are dissatisfied with a particular college professor, the teacher can lose a promotion or even be denied tenure, and fired. These dangers are not reserved for the truly incompetent. Almost all teachers can come under fire through student complaints or evaluations. "Even the most conscientious teacher" according to Rose Weitz, "risks lawsuits (if students claim discrimination), poor student evaluations (if students find a topic or approach threatening), or even dismissal (if administrators believe a teacher has behaved improperly or has simply cost the institution too much political capital)" (227).

In response to this exposure, some choose to minimize their vulnerability through avoidance of controversial topics and student participation, the use of carefully written lectures, and acceptance of facile student answers in contrast to delving for more analytical work. Controversial topics create, perhaps, the most

jeopardy. As George Jacobs asserts "some educationists avoid controversies, fearing that they may lead to serious rifts, even violence, between students and may also arouse the displeasure of administrators and community members" (291).

The sphere of dangerous topics encompasses religion, gender, race, sexuality, ethnic studies, issues of power, and social values such as the American Dream. The difficulty of teaching these topics is widely recognized. If a college teacher has not had direct experience with the awkward and distressing moment when students are suddenly and intensely aroused, angry, and aggrieved, certainly he or she knows someone who has had to abruptly backpedal, correct or disown words, ideas, statements or opinions, or worse still verbally appease warring student factions. Because it is so easy to wander, inadvertently, into one of these minefields, many educators write about their experiences, and offer specific strategies to successfully traverse these classroom collisions and the ensuing aftermath. They do so not only to help other professors avoid the hidden battlefields but also to urge others, ironically, onto the fields of battle. In contrast to those who make every effort to avoid controversial topics, others read nuanced value in foregrounding difference and debate in the classroom. "Energizing Learning: The Instructional Power of Conflict" by David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson and "Bearing the Weight: Discomfort as a Necessary Condition for 'Less Violent' and More Equitable Dialogic Learning" by Julia G. Brooks are only two examples of the many articles that address these issues.

Native American author Sherman Alexie would, I imagine, concur with the value of bringing controversy into the classroom. Alexie's short stories, novels, and poetry bestow a host of controversial topics on his readers. His work is replete with questions of power and race, grounded in both a current and a historical context. He also harasses his reader with the spectacle of the homeless and alcoholic Indian. Extending further, Alexie pushes sexual boundaries and the social conventions surrounding them. Many of these

treacherous topics are found in his short story collection *Ten Little Indians*. It is a collection, which expands the sphere of dangerous topics to the breaking point by incorporating a critique of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the national mythos surrounding it, and by interrogating the terrorism correlated with September 11<sup>th</sup>. Despite these elements of risk there is, strangely, less danger than usual. Functioning almost as an intermediary for the college teacher who dares to assign him, Alexie weaves resources for defusing potential strife and discord in the classroom directly into his literature.

One, nonetheless, wonders. Is it safe to bring him into the classroom? Is it safe to assign his stories? Some critics, after all, have skewered this author. Gauging Alexie's poetry, Kenneth Lincoln defines the author as "a late-twentieth-century, quasi-visionary clown [that] tells the truth that hurts and heals in one-liners cheesy as the Marx Brothers, trenchant as Lenny Bruce, tricky as Charlie Hill's BIA Halloween 'Trick or Treaty'" (qtd. in Evans 47). His work has been criticized "for his purportedly negative use of irony and satire—namely, literary connections to (white) popular culture and representations of Indian stereotypes that some consider 'inappropriate' and dangerously misleading for mainstream consumption" (Evans 47). Addressing a different threat, Scott Andrews writes "rather than exploring the exciting opportunities that cross-cultural exchanges can create for individuals and communities, the novel [*Reservation Blues*] resorts to a puzzling sense of despair and settles for survival rather than imagining success for its protagonists" (137).

It is hard to ignore that "there is a combativeness about Alexie, that he is, in a way at war . . . In most of his writing, sooner or later, Alexie is a 'polemicist,' which is to say, a 'warrior,'" according to Ron McFarland (28). The result of this warfare is that "with each publication, Alexie unsettles readers of all kinds by refusing to play by the rules" (Bernardin 53). The question is, then, can I, or any college teacher, afford to bring Sherman Alexie the "polemicist" and his warfare into the classroom; can I let Alexie "unsettle" my students. Is it too dangerous?

Originally seduced by *Ten Little Indians* on a long plane flight from Los Angeles to Green Bay, Wisconsin, I introduced the author's work carefully. Guessing that students at a large, urban, comprehensive university might appreciate the connection to Google and the student protagonist, I began with "The Search Engine." Though an excellent and thought provoking identity tale, this story is too long for my students, and length is always a big danger in the literature classroom. Students wedded to tweets and texts cannot be bothered, necessarily, with a 52-page story. In addition to the length, there is the troubling white poetry groupie, Star Girl, who only wants to have sex as a means of making restitution for all that has been stolen from Native Americans. Attempting to transcend history with the protagonist Harlan, who she (mis)recognizes as the Indian victim, she demands "put your pain into me . . . I can take it. I need it. I deserve it" (Alexie 45). I discarded the story (after one semester) as hilarious but difficult to explain or contextualize, and a long hard read—a quick guarantee for a negative evaluation at the end of the semester.

Becoming more daring, I next tried "Do Not Go Gentle," short but unsuitable for sexual content, in a Contemporary Literature class. One of the first difficulties of teaching this story is the dangerously ill baby. Not permitting a comforting distance, Alexie contracts the space between story and reader through personification of grief and the direct harshness of the situation. "My wife and I didn't know Mr. Grief in person" he writes, "until our baby boy got his face stuck between his mattress and crib and suffocated himself blue. He died three times that day, Mr. Grief squeezing his lungs tight . . ." (96). Students do not like sad stories; they constitute a disincentive to read. I have been pointedly asked, in fact, why there were only dark pieces in an Introduction to Literature class that included Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of the Amontillado," John Steinbeck's "The Chrysanthemums," and Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum est." It had not occurred to me before then to concern myself with the tenor of the literature (and I did not see that syllabus as particularly dark and dreary). But the possible death of a child is always disheartening. It is worse still when the author folds in the

hopelessness of the mother and father, who explain that the baby does not have a name because "we were Indians and didn't want to carry around too much hope" (Alexie 97). Embedded in this statement is the history of a people who cannot be too optimistic.

Deep sadness, history, and a prickly, political ambush in a short, six-page story is too much or nearly too much. But then, Alexie the "polemicist" weaves in the antidote. After the protagonist faces off in the bathroom with two cruel men, whose children are also terminal, he marches off innocently to Toys in Babeland to buy a good toy for "a coma baby" (99). Suddenly, the story is, briefly, not about a hospital and dying children or a toy store, but about a rube in a sex shop confronted with Chocolate Thunder, a "miracle vibrator . . . that is dark brown and fifteen inches long and needed a nine volt battery." Twisting the narrative as far as it will go, Alexie's characters displace the function of the sex toy and recast it as a healing talisman. They create a new Native American ritual "in the hallways of Children's Hospital," using Chocolate Thunder as "a magic wand" and "a drumstick" (100). Dismayed by the dying baby and stealthy insertion of political gibes, students are definitively distracted by Chocolate Thunder. Their laughter only increases when I strategically play (at the beginning of class) Chocolate Thunder's theme song: "that big old music from that 2001: *Space Odyssey* movie," that the protagonist hears the moment he encounters the "miracle vibrator." As one student wrote in his paper "Alexie did a great job of inserting comedy in a story that, at first, seemed sad and depressing" (Sarian 1).

It is, nevertheless, a risky story to teach. What if I have a "frightened Christian" in class—the same "frightened Christian" that Alexie's protagonist wants to avoid becoming, so much so that he refuses to leave the store, and insists on browsing in Toys in Babeland until he discovers Chocolate Thunder (99)? Carol Blessing warns, for example, about the danger of "teaching against the [religious] grain by covering works by female medieval mystics" (25). Part of the title of her article reveals the concerns of the students: "But Julian of Norwich said Jesus is a girl!" Even if one doesn't introduce material that ostensibly

reframes a core Christian figure, challenging religious beliefs about modesty or sex, even inadvertently, can create major problems in the classroom.

What then is the payoff in teaching "Do Not Go Gentle"? Playing off the resonance of Dylan Thomas' poem "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night," and the speaker's demand to "Rage, rage against" death, Alexie's story offers characters who have absolutely nothing to fight with, and still, they find a way to resist death. It is a story that provides students with an excellent example of personification, and some outrageous humor, always an unbeatable way to stimulate reading in a society that reads less and less. The reason I teach Alexie's "Do No Go Gentle," however, is the main thrust of the story. Rather than a story about sick babies or fighting death, it is really a story about perception. How does society define objects? How does society perceive the world? "We humans" according to the narrator, "are too simpleminded. We all like to think each person, place, or thing is only itself. A vibrator is a vibrator is a vibrator, right? But that's not true at all" (Alexie 101). Unsuitable for sexual content, it is a funny story that teaches students about the parameters of perception, and the limits therein.

With the mediation of *Chocolate Thunder* and Alexie's humor, I felt safe enough to teach "Do Not Go Gentle" in several different classes, both lower level and advanced. Students responded with a bit of apprehension but always laughed, and no one complained. But I held back from other stories for several semesters. I knew, however, that I was going to dip into *Ten Little Indians* again because I kept warning students that there were much more dangerous stories in Alexie's book. Although they asked, I would not reveal the specific titles. I was genuinely afraid to teach "Can I Get a Witness?" And yet, perversely, I was drawn to this story.

"Can I Get a Witness?" tells the story of an exceptionally unhappy woman. The unhappiness of this woman is so extensive that she looks for an opportunity to end her misery where others would not look; she looks to cataclysmic events such as September 11<sup>th</sup>. Unlike the rest of her office who

scurried out, "she'd stayed in the conference room [on the sixtieth floor of the Columbia Center]" and "walked to the window and waited for her airplane to come" (Alexie 2003, 89). Hoping for her own catastrophe causes the protagonist to peer deep inside September 11<sup>th</sup> and find a very different horror than most Americans find. Foraging for a chance to teach this story, I turned to a Junior Honors Seminar: Narrative Transgressions and Boundary Crossings in American Literature. A course about breaking the rules, a course that begins with Gloria Anzaldua's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," Tey Diana Rebolledo's "Mujeres Andariegas: Good Girls and Bad [wandering, roaming women]" and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlett Letter* is a course that seems completely consistent with Alexie's "Can I Get a Witness?" It is a course that seems to have enough space for Alexie's female protagonist.

Although she is an unlikable character—a woman who not only asks acutely disquieting questions but also insists on piercing the veil of national trauma that surrounds September 11<sup>th</sup>—she is still a woman who "missed god!" a woman encased in loneliness (70). She is alienated from her husband, her two sons, and her work. "A champion powwow fancydancer when she'd met him, a skinny, beautiful, feminine boy who moved in bright feathered circles," her husband has transmogrified into a man who mounts twenty-two American flags in his home and impels his fully assimilated sons toward the Marine Corp. "How" she implores, "could any Indian put on an [sic] U.S. military uniform and not die of toxic irony?" (Alexie 91). Alexie's protagonist is lonely not only because she misses god but also because she misses her husband and her children. Far from the "endless pine forests of the Spokane Indian Reservation," she is deeply lonely in the postmodern world of contemporary Seattle (69).

Musing that she would rather go to debtors' prison than return to her husband and children, she is, oddly, comforted by the bombing of the restaurant she is sitting in. After noting "his smile," she speculates that the terrorist "had come to rescue her" (72). Before the shattered glass and fractured building, and before the dismembered and mutilated bodies, she "knew God had answered

[her] prayers." In shock and bloody, she asks the male protagonist, a good samaritan, to take her to his apartment. Once there, he becomes the unfortunate witness to her impoverished relationships, deep-seated misery, and troubling thoughts about September 11<sup>th</sup>. While he is not meant to ever tell anyone about their conversation, she demands that he be present—that he receive direct knowledge of her pain, that he hear her. She begs him, in fact. "Please," she whispered. "Please listen to me." She was desperate" for someone to listen because no one sees her anymore, and no one hears her anymore. Neither she nor her pain exists for her family or anyone else.

Although he resists becoming her witness, he listens to her; while he waits for her to feel better, and recover from a seizure, and possible concussion, he listens. Waiting, trapped in the apartment with her, he can only listen. They begin to talk about September 11<sup>th</sup> (and terrorism), a topic that arises, almost naturally, from the bombing of the restaurant. They begin, as so many do when discussing a momentous event that serves as a life marker, with the question "where were you . . .?" and move fairly quickly to her bizarre interpretation of the cataclysm (86). A woman who waits for her plane, and, finally, welcomes the restaurant bomber as someone who has "come to rescue her," a woman who believes that God has finally come back to her, and "answered [her] prayers" is a woman who can shockingly assert "I don't think everybody who died in the towers was innocent" (Alexie 72, 93, 89).

Clearly, Alexie's female protagonist sees the planes, that were propelled into buildings, as something very different than most Americans see. Rather than instruments of death and terror, the planes and their pilots represent, for example, the potential of easy suicide, "suicide by inertia" (89). For her, they especially represent a field of expanding chaos that might enable someone to escape his or her miserable life; one could choose to leave behind the people and the misery in thousands of tons of dust and debris, and move forward to something completely different. This upside down critical lens—this distinct way of viewing the catastrophe (and its horror) in conjunction with her stream of

consciousness thought process enables her to make space, somehow, for the possibility that some of the deaths at the World Trade Center could be good deaths—beneficial deaths. She reminds the male protagonist, "those towers were filled with bankers and stockbrokers and lawyers." Post Enron and the mortgage/banking crisis, it is almost not necessary to ask, "how honest do you think they were?" (89). Moving quickly, her trajectory of thoughts careens from "bankers and stockbrokers and lawyers" to men who cheat "on their wives" and men who were "beating their kids," and crashes finally with "one of those bastards" in the towers "raping his kids." It is not enough to speculate. She must do the math: "twelve hundred men died that day . . . a few hundred [cheaters] . . . one hundred more [beaters] . . . and an evil bastard [one raping]" (89). In scale it measures up to September 11<sup>th</sup> but it is a very different, everyday, horror.

She sees the cataclysm as an opportunity. It was an opportunity for those who wanted to commit suicide but could not quite bring themselves to do it. It was an opportunity for those who were "just sad and broken and dying inside"—the people who were being tortured—cheated on, beaten, raped, wives and children (Alexie 92). They can be serendipitously free. She sees a disaster, and speculates that some of those killed "did deserve to die" (89). On a more personal level, she also sees an opportunity to escape her own miserable life.

In turning the camera lens sharply away from the current, prevailing context of September 11<sup>th</sup> toward other pictures, Alexie's protagonist challenges the way September 11<sup>th</sup> has been seen and memorialized, the way it has been cut into stone as one very special tragic event. "Almost immediately" according to syndicated columnist Mark Shields, "9/11 assumed a place in the national mythos alongside the fourth of July, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Civil War, the Gettysburg Address, to name a few." Mickey Huff and Paul Rea also assert that "traditional American mythology was used to exalt the official story of 9/11, a story that has become the only story." September 11<sup>th</sup> has been exclusively framed as a national trauma and a national horror. This framing works to efface everything else. Inside this narrow context, no one and

no other country has ever suffered like that before. It was framed, moreover, as completely unwarranted, with only victims—national victims that the entire country must mourn, and never forget. The only spare space in this framework was created for the heroes of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

The protagonist's piercing questions and shocking possibilities are horrifying! And yet, they make one turn and look in the same way one looks at a traffic accident even when we do not want to see. The reader and student become, rather unwittingly, her witness, along with the male protagonist. With him, the reader and student are forced to think about it and ask questions. One must consider her succinct, disturbing critiques of terrorism, September 11<sup>th</sup>, and the way it has been framed.

The narrator's characterization of the restaurant bombing as "a highly effective and economical suicide bombing" in conjunction with the protagonist's musing that the "United States" might proffer "seventy-three virgins to each terrorist if he would abstain from violence" work to diminish, for example, if not terrorism then the devastating effects of terrorism (Alexie 71, 74). Marking the efficacy and cost of a bombing directly after enumerating the dead and injured evokes a general business tone while suggesting that sex might deter a terrorist evokes a playful, light tone. One is shunted away from death and the individual victim in much the same way one is shunted away by the protagonist's focus on the opportunities (she sees) embedded in September 11<sup>th</sup>.

If the reader and student do not succumb (and most will not) to the different contexts and lighter, variant tones offered by the protagonist for September 11<sup>th</sup>, certainly he or she is engaged by her delineation of "grief porn." Just the name is captivating. "Didn't you get sick," she demands "of all the news about the Trade Center? Didn't you get exhausted by all the stories and TV shows and sad faces and politicians and memorials and books?" Scornfully, she defines this activity. "It was awful and obscene, all of it, it was grief porn." And he admits "I got so tired of it, I picked up my TV, carried it down the stairs, and threw it in the Dumpster" (91). If one cannot begin to fathom what this woman is

thinking or saying when she confesses her perception of September 11<sup>th</sup> and its inherent opportunities, one cannot help but recognize "grief porn" even if one does not like the term. The association of grief with obscenity and porn reflects the way in which people naturally become exhausted with media oversaturation of a single story. It also reflects the way they become exhausted by grief, disaster, and loss. One definition of porn—"the depiction of acts in a sensational manner so as to arouse a quick emotional response" shifts easily to the definition of yellow journalism—"journalism that exploits, distorts or exaggerates the news to create sensations and attract readers." September 11<sup>th</sup> and the people, directly involved, were exploited in a manner designed to draw us to the news (and its advertisers). Americans were bombarded over and over again with images and text that should not necessarily be seen or heard, perhaps for reasons of privacy or delicacy, or perhaps because it was used to excite people to war.

The concept of "grief porn" works, furthermore, to critique all the excess—not just the media saturation but also the way in which this horrible disaster was represented as the utmost—the worst. It seriously became too much, not just because of the extensive coverage but also because September 11<sup>th</sup> completely effaced everything else. While this effacement makes sense because just how does one deal with planes crashing into buildings, with people in them, and buildings disintegrating as a result, it was, nonetheless, too much because there was no critical turning of the picture, no inquiry of the issues. Instead, it was just disaster, terrorists, and victims. There were no questions. It is the excess and the exhaustion with it that signifies something is wrong with the critical lens used for September 11<sup>th</sup>. Notably, the male protagonist agrees with her. He, too, became sick of the "grief porn." He became so sick of it that he could not watch another minute, and divested himself of the instrument of his pain—the television.

Their concurrence notwithstanding, Alexie's "Can I Get a Witness?" is very dangerous. How can this story be taught or even read by Americans? To talk about opportunities and porn, and rend the concept of innocent victims is almost unthinkable for most Americans. It is very difficult to ideologically rework

the narrative of September 11<sup>th</sup> and interrogate the position of stature it occupies in the American mythos. How can this story be taught?

First, I considered the specific audience. An Honors Seminar is generally made up of students who not only seek intellectual challenges but also bring to the classroom an intense desire to interrogate the world around them. To create even more space for this controversial piece, I began with "Do Not Go Gentle," knowing, from previous experience, that students would like it, laugh, and be disarmed. Later, teaching "Can I Get a Witness?" in an upper level Contemporary Literature class, and concerned that this would not be enough, I also incorporated two poems (Kimiko Hahn's "Her Very Eyes" and Naomi Shihab Nye's "Shoulders") and a short commentary by John Updike, specifically chosen to offset Alexie's story. These pieces respond to September 11<sup>th</sup> in the conventional way. Updike writes after witnessing the fall of the towers "we knew we had just witnessed thousands of deaths; we clung to each other as if we ourselves were falling" (3211). We read these pieces directly after the story. But they seemed unnecessary. Students did not miss them in the Honors Seminar, and they seemed superfluous in the upper level Contemporary Literature class. What I absolutely relied on, however, to stave off student insurrection, or even complaints, was, of course, Alexie. How then is this story mediated? What resources does he weave in? How does he make it partially palatable?

"Can I Get a Witness?" is mediated primarily by the juxtaposition of the male protagonist and female protagonist. A good samaritan who tries to help, the male protagonist stands as the voice of reason. He sees terrorism as horrible, something without purpose. He asks himself, for example, "what makes any sense in a world where a man can run into a crowded restaurant and explode a bomb?" (Alexie 77). His response fits neatly into the American context for terrorism. He resists, therefore, her crazy, contrary ideas. Even before she confronts him with her most extreme ideas, he tries to refute her contrary reactions to her family. He firmly asserts "but, you can't hate [your husband]" and "I don't believe" you hate your kids (Alexie 79). When she talks about September

11th he reacts very strongly. He calls her mathematical speculations of those who deserve to die "terrible algebra" (90). When she begins her horrifying story of those (killed in the towers) who were not innocent, he demands "Who are you? And then asks witheringly, shockingly "Osama's press agent?" (89).

As she continues to talk, his response amplifies. He vomits. He cannot digest her upside down critical lens (nor her tremendous sadness). He cannot take it in. He must expel it because it is too repugnant. In addition to physically rejecting her ideas about September 11<sup>th</sup>, he also suggests that "her story seemed more potentially destructive than any bomb . . ." (91). How can a single viewpoint of September 11<sup>th</sup> be more destructive? And yet the male protagonist sees it this way. "Words [are] dangerous" to him and he wants her to stop talking. The only way that Alexie allows this woman to tell her story is with a forceful counterpoint.

Still, this is not enough. If the male protagonist is the voice of reason, who must vomit back her ideas, she, in juxtaposition, is an extreme character. Before she tells a diametrically opposed tale of September 11<sup>th</sup>, she is a woman who is so unhappy that she absolutely must escape. She hates her husband and her children. Her sons hate her or at least, she believes they do. She positions herself as a bad employee, a bad wife, and a bad mother. The female protagonist is not even sure if her experience matches reality. "Again she wondered if she was crazy, if she was dreaming this whole day, if this man and his apartment were illusions" (81). Alexie implants a safety mechanism in the repetition of her sanity query: "again she wondered." This repetition suggests she may actually have a psychological problem. Crazy people, notably, cannot be held accountable for what they say. They might say absolutely anything. She is, moreover, unhealthy. At the very least, she is in shock from the bombing. She has a seizure in his apartment, and she may have a concussion. Her contextual framework for September 11<sup>th</sup> can be easily dismissed because she is either crazy or seriously ill, or both. Diminished capacity is a reasonable assessment for her mental state. In addition, when he first meets her, the male protagonist asks

himself if she is a terrorist. Although he immediately rejects this possibility on the basis of his own racism, the idea that she may be an enemy of the United States is still embedded in the story. Her attempted displacement of the singular American perception of September 11<sup>th</sup> posits a tiny bit of logic in his momentary fear. And, of course, if she is a terrorist, it doesn't matter what she thinks or says.

The juxtaposition of these two characters—a male voice of reason versus an extreme woman who is sick and possibly crazy—works to diminish if not negate everything the female protagonist asserts. If she cannot be taken seriously then it doesn't matter if she says things that do not fit inside the American context of terrorism and September 11<sup>th</sup>. If she is not a likable or trustworthy character then her ideas can be wildly off track. She is the perfect foil for Alexie's warfare. And she definitively "unsettles" the reader (Bernardin 53).

It is the position of the male protagonist, however, that is the strongest. In alignment with mainstream American politics, he is on solid ground despite his inadvertent critiques of September 11<sup>th</sup>. His suggestion that other things—throwing glasses and telling perverse stories about September 11<sup>th</sup> are worse than bombing buildings functions in two different ways. While it serves to undermine the position of the female protagonist, it also works to diminish terrorism and its destruction. His conversation with the pizza boy is more problematic. Responding to his youth and ignorance, he asks "how could he know how many teenagers around the world had already survived bombings, and lived with the daily threat of more bombings, and still found courage enough to dance, sing, curse, and make love in the tall grass beside this or that river?" (Alexie 82-83). His innocent question, particularly in contrast to the questions of the woman, functions, nevertheless to expand the concept of terrorism to something that occurs globally—to something that is not exclusive to the United States. It moves beyond the provincial American bubble of September 11<sup>th</sup>. It suggests, albeit inadvertently, that there is another way to consider the cataclysm. Despite these lapses, the male protagonist, as counterpoint, makes it

possible for the female character to pose her radical scenarios and ask her outrageous questions.

In addition to this crucial juxtaposition of characters, Alexie also mediates "Can I Get a Witness?" as he almost always does, with humor. Unlike the humor in "Do Not Go Gentle," which is loud and rollicking from the moment the protagonist torments the two men in the bathroom, the humor in this story begins more slowly and is generally attenuated. Waiting a very long time for her waiter, the female protagonist riffs, for example, on what he might be doing. After musing to herself that he could be "banging a waitress," or "banging the handsome Guatemalan busboy" since she wants to be politically correct, she wonders if the waiter is using her credit card to buy "Internet porn or remaindered celebrity biographies" (69). This sounds highly implausible and thus, ridiculous and funny. The idea of celebrities with so little shine on their image that their bios won't sell and have been discounted seems silly. It is a way of making this dangerous woman initially likable, especially when she sings "chicken this, chicken that" to her two chicken entrees, happy that she received an extra dish by mistake (70). The reader is disarmed.

Discussing the humor in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Joseph Coulombe asserts that Alexie, who writes about exacting topics like "the lack of options open to Indians . . . uses humor to draw readers in and entertain them; once he has them, he communicates his world view, one that does not necessarily reflect the comforting, traditional American ideals of equal opportunity and democratic justice for all" (108). This is true in much of Alexie's work. Humor is an integral literary strategy for him. Alexie, himself, in a 2010 interview calls it "a passport into other people's cultures. A temporary visa," and identifies "humor" as his "green card" (Nelson 43). It allows him to go places that others cannot go. Once the reader laughs at the female protagonist in this story, and begins to like her, Alexie can seduce him or her into becoming her witness, into listening.

The reader likes her even more when she refuses to be disconcerted by the name "crazy pussy." Rather than be offended by the male protagonist's

assertion that she is "crazy pussy, and [he] was married to crazy pussy before, and [he has] no real interest in getting near it again," she responds exuberantly. "Crazy pussy!" she shouted and laughed. She rolled off the couch onto the floor and laughed. "Nobody has ever called me crazy pussy!" (Alexie 81). In addition to being comforted that he does not want to have sex with her, she is also tickled by the term. Although the word pussy is used to signify people, the personification of the vagina or sex as (sane) or crazy is a bit odd, and thus funny. It functions in a shorthand fashion to suggest she might be trouble but the humor precludes offense on her part, and the part of the reader. In this way, Alexie welcomes the reader, who is now ready for something more.

In their argument that humor should be used to teach the controversial elements of sociology, such as "race, inequality, class and gender relations," Shawn Bingham and Alexander Hernandez cite Murray Davis' assertion that "comedians like sociologists . . . deconstruct, unmask, and debunk status quo social expectations, organizations, rules and people; reorder and reverse the audience's perspective; . . . challenge hypocrisy; . . . [and] point out the fluidity of social life," among other things. "Comedians," in particular, "Davis points out 'break open our frames by disordering what has been ordered by human constructions and social expectations'" (336-337). Although he is not a comedian per se, this is exactly what Alexie does in "Can I Get a Witness?;" it is what he does in many of his short stories, poems, and novels. He "unmasks" and "breaks open." Discussing the work of Richard Pryor and Margaret Cho, Bingham and Alexander maintain that "the comedic arena is a space of free inquiry where no subject is taboo and the rules of political correctness can be temporarily suspended" (339). Multiple critics recognize this space and its power, both on the comedy stage and in literature. In his analysis of Native American humor and Alexie's strategic use of laughter, Coulombe designates it "a space of shared inquiry and reciprocal empathy." He refers to Mikhail Bakhtin's idea that "the power of laughter generates 'a crude zone of contact' that 'demolishes fear and piety,' allowing the 'absolutely free investigation' of its subject" (95). While the

degree of inquiry and empathy are disputable, particularly in his more radical pieces like "Can I Get a Witness?," and the zone of contact is definitely "crude"—a rather messy space that will not necessarily garner open, thoughtful responses, Alexie is exemplary at wielding his arsenal of humor (and satire). He makes us laugh even when we know we should not. When the laughter finally stops, there is a long pregnant pause, and one can almost hear the questions begin to surface. He makes the reader laugh, and then, he makes some readers interrogate the strange world we live in. Reminding us that "humor acts as a transcendent force," Coulombe "contends that Alexie's brand of humor, more than others perhaps, is [in Louis Owens' words] 'that trickster at the heart of the Native American imagination'" (95). Because he is so adept and because he uses this skill to go to literary places and spaces where others would not necessarily venture, he is, perhaps, trickster. His humor makes it possible for Alexie to challenge something as sacrosanct as September 11<sup>th</sup>. It also makes it possible to teach "Can I Get a Witness?"

If a single story requires so much mediation, one might wonder why insist on teaching it, even in an Honors Seminar. The value of this story, like "Do Not Go Gentle," is found, once again, in the issue of perception. It is not so much a question of how we perceive September 11<sup>th</sup>. Rather, one must ask how did we arrive at a singular static critical lens? How is it possible for almost an entire country to see something so important in only one context? Alexie's female protagonist splits this context wide open, and provides a rich base of material for student discussion. The value of this story is also found in the scholarly skill of critique. I don't care so much what opinions, political or otherwise, my students hold. I do care about how they arrived at these opinions. Too often, there is little inquiry. In place of serious questions we have easy adhesion, much like the popularity contests depicted on reality television. I believe there is real educational value in learning to ask a question rather than learning someone's answer. It is crucially important to learn to critique something, especially against one's own personal grain. When students adhere to something the strongest,

and have a personal stake in it, this is precisely when they should be required to ask questions about it, even if the process is disconcerting. I believe a complete university education must include the tablecloth experience. Like a magician, the teacher should pull the tablecloth from the table while it is covered with items—glasses, silverware, and the like. Unlike a magician, however, everything should fall on the floor in complete disarray, broken into shards and bits. Students should, in other words, leave a college classroom, at least one time, shaking their heads and muttering, perhaps even angrily, "what in the hell?" They should, absolutely, have questions. If they recover, and replace their feet quickly in the old treads and grooves, fine! As long as students have the tablecloth experience at least once, then fine. Alexie, definitively, posits the tablecloth and the chaos in his stories. It is painful and confusing to be the protagonist's witness. But as Ron McFarland asserts "what makes the pain and anger bearable for the reader" in Alexie's work is his snap, crackle and pop humor (31). While this humor worked for most of my students, one seemed uncomfortable in the Honors Seminar, and a student in the upper level Contemporary Literature class was angry. The mostly positive response of other students worked to attenuate their feelings. It was, perhaps, difficult for them to move against the current. This was especially true because I position myself midway between the issues. I ask my students, for example, if the ideas of the female protagonist are crazy; I express a certain measure of horror. In doing so, I make space for them to disagree with her or disagree with my questions.

"What You Pawn I Will Redeem" is another difficult story to teach but for very different reasons. Without an Honors Seminar or even a Senior Seminar, I retreated a bit, in my next choice from *Ten Little Indians*. While this story is not as politically incendiary as "Can I Get a Witness?," there are, nonetheless, serious ethical concerns in the classroom. Some literary theorists maintain that much of Alexie's work reinscribes pernicious Indian stereotypes. He has been harshly critiqued, as I previously noted, for "representations of Indian stereotypes that some consider 'inappropriate' and dangerously misleading for mainstream

consumption" (Evans 47). These critics believe that Native American authors must strenuously avoid material that presents Native Americans in a negative slant. This is a valid concern, particularly against the backdrop of the Invented Indian. Explaining this concept, Louis Owens writes "in fact, the Indian in today's world consciousness is a product of literature, history, and art, and a product, that, as an invention, often bears little resemblance to actual, living Native American people" (4). While much of this invention is focused on the vanishing noble savage who is spiritually close to the earth, passive, and childlike, it also includes stereotypes of the homeless, alcoholic Indian. It is these very representations that stimulate attack. Discussing Gloria Bird's indictment of Alexie, for example, Evans points out her assertion, as she assesses *Reservation Blues*, that the author "'prey[s] upon' his community and culture in perpetuating damaging stereotypes, including that of the drunken Indian." The negative representations "'become" according to Bird, "a part of the problem, and returns an image of a generic 'Indian' back to the original producers of that image" (qtd. in Evans 51). This is a concern for more than a few critics, as Evans articulates. Robins suggests, in fact, that Alexie is not more popular, precisely, because of "the frequent and discomfiting presence of alcohol and alcoholism in his works" (25).

Like some of his earlier work, "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" appears to reinscribe parts of the Invented Indian or negative portrayals of Native Americans. Jackson Jackson, a homeless, alcoholic Indian, is the focal point of the story. Aligning with the most repugnant characteristics of alcoholics, the protagonist panhandles, fights, vomits, and passes out. He takes, notably, the little bit of money that Junior, one of the two people who comprise what he calls "[my] regular crew, my teammates, my defenders, and my posse" has (170). He takes it, moreover, while Junior is passed out. While this appropriation may be mediated by the fact that Jackson checks to make sure that Junior is still breathing, there is no indication that the code of these "teammates" permits his behavior. Partially defining his relationship with alcohol, and the misplaced

importance it has in his life, Alexie's protagonist calls it "bottles of imagination." Inasmuch as he has a major task to complete (raising \$974.00 in a single day), he relies on the alcohol to provide a plan or at least, some initial ideas. "Thinking hard," he explains, "we huddled in an alley beneath the Alaska Way Viaduct and finished off those bottles one, two, and three" (174). And just that fast, the "teammates" are drunk and pass out. Later in the day, Jackson, drunk again, blacks out and cannot remember what he did or how he passed out on the railroad tracks. In many ways, the protagonist converges with the stereotype of the homeless drunk Indian. No teacher wants to bring this image into the classroom.

But Jackson, like so many of Alexie's characters is multifaceted; he is complex. Jackson is not only very intelligent but also a bit of a philosopher. He is self-aware, to some extent, about his faults if not about his disease. Jackson claims, for example, that "being homeless is probably the only thing [he has] ever been good at" and delineates his specific skills (Alexie 170). Some of these qualities make the reader feel better about the protagonist. We surmise that he might be clean although it isn't clear how he accomplishes this as a homeless man. His philosophy extends to normalizing the status of being homeless. He informs the reader "One day you have a home and the next you don't. . ." (169). While this statement might have seemed like a rationalization in the past, with the current economy it seems to be exactly how it happens. People have a home, and then suddenly they don't, and maybe, they aren't sure how it happened. His philosophy also expands to protecting Indians, a very big task, in a country where the Invented Indian has basically become a commercial interest in addition to being a fetish for many Americans. Even as he introduces himself, the protagonist maintains "Indians have to work hard to keep secrets from hungry white folks" (169). Emphasizing the importance of this credo, he repeats it when the Aleuts refuse to share the songs that belong solely to their tribe. "We Indians have to keep our secrets" (191). This desire to conserve is the only reasonable

approach given the historical losses, the Invented Indian, and the fetishism for all things Indian.<sup>i</sup>

What serves to differentiate Alexie's protagonist from the alcoholic panhandler at the side of the freeway, however, is his connection with his grandmother, and his desire to redeem her stolen "powwow-dance regalia", a crucial family artifact (171).<sup>ii</sup> The protagonist is fired up in an attempt to recover the regalia from a pawnshop despite the price of 1,000 dollars (reduced to \$999. for 24 hours minus the \$20. contributed by the pawnbroker and the \$5. he already has). Jackson commits himself to a daylong quest to obtain the money, and then the regalia. As the reader follows Jackson on his journey, he or she sees him at his worst—taking Junior's money, drinking, and passing out.

But the reader and student also discover completely different facets of the character. Although he is focused on his quest, he does not allow this to prevent him from adhering to a "tribal" code of sharing (Alexie 181). Jackson Jackson is generous. When he wins one hundred dollars on a lottery ticket, he gives the store clerk twenty dollars, insisting that she is part of his family. Next, he wants to share with Junior but can't find him. While the drinks he buys (for the Indians in the bar) might be more about drinking in good company, he could have spent the remaining eighty dollars on alcohol for himself. Later when he receives another twenty-five dollars, he buys breakfast for the Aleuts from the dock. It is Jackson Jackson's general attitude toward people that engages the reader. In addition to his generosity, he carefully listens to the songs the lonely Aleuts sing. He contextualizes the meal he eats with these Indians as a feast; it almost seems like a celebration. The protagonist remarks, "Grateful, we feasted" (192). Although several people, including a police officer, suggest that he take a legal approach to recouping the regalia, Jackson resists. He refuses for two reasons. He does not blame the pawnbroker, and he doesn't necessarily want him to lose his money. More importantly, Jackson sees his effort as very personal and crucially significant. "I'm on a mission here," he explains to Officer Williams. "I want to be a hero, you know? I want to win it back like a knight . . . I care about

[my grandmother's regalia]. It's been a long time since I really cared about something" (189). Jackson's desire to treat the pawnbroker equitably in conjunction with his framing of his attempt to recoup the regalia as part of a chivalrous code poses a very different protagonist. He cannot be contained by the simplistic stereotype of a drunken Indian. Jackson's choice to conduct himself honorably, in addition to his passionate stories about his grandmother, positions him outside the narrow confines of a stereotype.

Analyzing "Alexie's use of stereotypes in *Indian Killer*, including prejudicial images held by whites," Evans suggests that they are "the 'open containers' holding negative 'familiar' notions of Indians that add texture and valences of meaning to the novel's mythic dimension through their inversion, demolition, and defamiliarization. In other words, Alexie tends to turn inside out stereotypes such as the drunken Indian; refashioned through satire and irony, these 'open containers' can resonate with fresh values" (65-66). The protagonist in "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" fits the "negative 'familiar' notions of Indians." The positioning of this character, however, also functions as Evans suggests (in *Indian Killer*): it produces "inversion" and "defamiliarization." The reader cannot rely on the stereotype. The drunken Indian has become something more, something unknown. This defamiliarization forces the reader to return to the story and reevaluate. In doing so, he or she discovers that "Jackson Jackson's story feels like a success" (Ladino 47). Rather than an urban space comprised solely of alcohol, despair, and alienation, there are some "good people—the sympathetic police officer, the friendly store clerk, and ultimately, the generous pawnshop owner . . . who sells him the regalia for five dollars instead of a thousand." Jackson has completed his quest. "It is hard not to share" as Jennifer Ladino asserts, his "joy and optimism" (47). The reader also shares his spontaneous celebration and ceremony. The reader becomes still, a bit like the urban space does: "Pedestrians stopped. Cars stopped. The city stopped." And the reader watches as "they all watched [him] dance with [his] grandmother" (Alexie 194).

In addition to the displacement of the stereotype, it must be noted that Alexie reminds his readers of both historical struggles and losses, and their enduring aftermath. While these reminders often appear, as an aside, or embedded in the text, they are integral parts of his literary work. Jackson, for example, is not only the "After Columbus Arrived Indian," but also Jackson Jackson, an ironic reference to Andrew Jackson's devastating policies of Indian removal (171). These disturbing reminders function both as context for his characters and stories, and as expository links to contemporary social problems. While Native American identity is still tangled with stereotypes, some of the problems embedded in these stereotypes, such as alcoholism still exist. Discussing this issue, Robins quotes the *Journal of Counseling and Clinical Psychology*: "Acute heavy drinking has been found to be prevalent among American Indians [and . . .] in a study of Northwest Indians, 40% of men and 33% of women reported acute heavy drinking for the previous month" (30). Despite concerns of reinscribing stereotypes, "Alexie presents," as Evans asserts (in his discussion of *Fancydancing*), "an uncompromisingly realistic portrait of the reservation and its inhabitants in terms of their pain, [and] the coping mechanisms they use for dealing with reality . . ." (56). In alignment with Evan's argument, it is reasonable to assert that Alexie also provides a realistic urban image of Indians who struggle with homelessness and alcoholism in "What You Pawn I Will Redeem." While these social problems and the inherent links to the past are important, Alexie refuses to make these issues the focal point of his work. Jackson Jackson is not a victim. Nor can he be solely defined by his alcoholism or homelessness. Rather, these characteristics are only one part of who he is. Alexie's readers are not shackled to the Invented Indian or the stereotypes.

His story is, nevertheless, a dangerous story to teach. I did not know how students would respond. My fears were mirrored in at least one student paper, which reads "Alexie portrays Native Americans as being friendly, unproductive drunks. Every Indian in the story is a bum—the protagonist [is] the biggest bum

of all" (Orellana 1). This opinion, notwithstanding, teaching the story turned out to be a fairly good experience. Students did not initially bring up the negative characteristics and they responded positively to the idea of Jackson's quest. Yes, most of them agreed, it was a true chivalrous quest with real value. Most of them liked Jackson despite his faults. Most of the students were able to look beyond the stereotype they (perhaps) expected. Alexie, as usual, seduced them with his humor and his skillful narrative techniques. I played devil's advocate, suggesting repeatedly, that Jackson's task might not be a serious quest and that he might be just "a bum," in my student's words. But the class, as a whole, insisted that there is more to this story, much more. One student wrote "they [his grandmother's stories, triggered by his search for the regalia] brought a sense of joy to the protagonist, a sense of joy that his life had lacked" (Korsun 2).

I will continue to teach stories from *Ten Little Indians*, but I will also continue to be a bit wary. Mediation of the controversies is a major consideration. Perhaps, I should add, for example, statistics of contemporary alcoholism in Indian communities. I will consider which classes are most apt to take a second, serious look at Alexie's stories. And I will be careful. I will emphasize Alexie's humor, always beginning our study with "Do Not Go Gentle," and playing Chocolate Thunder's theme song (*2001 Space Odyssey*). After setting a receptive tone, I will position myself midway between the issues, and leave the polemics to Alexie. One element that makes a significant difference is the diversity of my students. In addition to Armenians, Russians, Koreans, African Americans, Mexican Americans and many other populations, we also have traditional and nontraditional students in terms of age, and first in their family to attend college. This diversity stimulates an open and far ranging response to Alexie and his work. It makes it not only possible, but also rewarding to teach his dangerous stories.

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<sup>i</sup> All three of these elements are embedded, notably, in the original loss of the  
powwow regalia. The theft of the cultural artifacts is a common theme in Native

American literature. It figures prominently, for example, in Gerald Vizenor's *Trickster of Liberty: Native Heirs to a Wild Baronage* and Gordon Henry's *The Light People*.

<sup>ii</sup> Interestingly, there is a connection between powwow regalia and alcoholism in Thomas King's novel *Green Grass, Running Water*. King's character Amos is unable to protect his family or culture, as indicated in his inability to protect the regalia at the border crossing. Impotent and exhausted, he later becomes an alcoholic.

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