

The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist fight in Heaven

By Sherman Alexie

Discussion Questions:

1. What parallels can you draw between the American Indian life depicted in this book and what you may have learned in other contexts about societies in transition or cultures that have been colonized?
2. What view of justice towards American Indians is depicted in "The Trail of Thomas Builds-the-Fire"? What events does Thomas testify about? How effective is this chapter in engaging the themes of the book?
3. Alexie has been quoted saying, "Everything is a matter of perception." How has this book influenced your perception of American Indian experience as it is lived today? From your background knowledge, do you believe this book is representative of American Indian tribes in general?
4. Attempting to hold onto cultural traditions while assimilating into the modern world appears to be the challenge for American Indians as well as many non-Indians. What insight does Alexie offer? Does he suggest that only the individual can determine the answer? Provide examples from the book to support your perception.
5. In the story "A Drug Called Tradition," the narrator talks about skeletons that represent the past and the future. How does he describe these skeletons and how must a young Indian relate to them? What is he saying about tradition in this selection?
6. Humor and despair intermingle throughout the stories. What are some examples of this intermingling that impressed you as especially important? What is the point of this ambivalence?
7. The narrator's mother asks him to write a "good story" because she wants readers to know "that good things always happen to Indians, too." (p. 140) What story does he tell? Why do you think he concludes with "Believe me, there is just barely enough goodness in all of this"?
8. Junior graduates as valedictorian of a non-reservation farm town school. He comments that back on the reservation his former classmates graduate, but a few can't read and others are given "attendance diplomas." The bright students who graduate from the reservation school, he says, are "shaken, frightened, because they don't know what comes next." (p. 180) How would you explain their fear even though they have been successful in their school?

9. In the Fun House chapter, Aunt Nezzy made "a full-length beaded dress that was too heavy for anyone to wear" (76). She then stated, "When a woman comes along who can carry the weight of this dress on her back, then we will have found the one who will save us all." From your readings in other subjects, to what mythic or heroic archetypes can you compare the challenge of wearing Aunt Nezzy's dress?
10. After reading *The Lone Ranger* and *Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, what significance and symbolism can you derive from his title choice for this collection? How do these two pop-culture icons of the title—the Lone Ranger and Tonto, television partners who battle crime—connect with the recurring themes of the book?
11. Despite repeated references to self-destruction, racism, poverty, alcoholism, despair, and domestic violence, how do these American Indians keep hope alive?
12. In "The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn't Flash Red Anymore," the author notes: "But it's almost like Indians can easily survive the big stuff. Mass murder, loss of language and land rights. It's the small things that hurt the most. The waitress who wouldn't take an order, Tonto, the Washington Redskins." (49). How do you react to this statement? To what extent can you relate it to your own observations or experiences?
13. How surprised were you by Victor's treatment of a fellow Indian in the selection titled "Amusements"? How do you explain his behavior?
14. How does Junior's relationship with his white girlfriend in Seattle reveal his conflicts and fears about his place in society beyond the reservation?
15. In "Someone Kept Saying Powwow," Junior describes Norma as "a cultural lifeguard." After he revealed to her how he had joined with others to mistreat a struggling black basketball player during college, why was she finally able to forgive him? Where else in the collection does the theme of forgiveness play a role?
16. In the book's opening story, as Victor's uncles, Adolph and Arnold, fight in the yard, and someone shouts that they might kill each other. But the narrator writes, "Nobody disagreed and nobody moved to change the situation. Witnesses. They were all witnesses and nothing more. For hundreds of years, Indians were witnesses to crimes of an epic scale" [3]. What are the crimes Native Americans have witnessed? What effects do these crimes have on the circumstances and behavior of the characters in Alexie's stories?
17. In the story, "A Drug Called Tradition," how does tradition function like a drug for Native Americans? What does it offer them? What does it let them dream of?
18. The narrator of "The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn't Flash Red Anymore" observes, "It's hard to be optimistic on the reservation. When a glass sits on a table

here, people don't wonder if it's half-filled or half empty. They just hope it's good beer" [49]. Why is this mixture of humor and despair so effective in expressing the mood of life on the reservation? Where else do such moments occur in the collection?

19. In "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," Thomas Builds-the-Fire has a dream in which he is told to go to Spokane and wait for a vision. What does his vision turn out to be?

20. What kind of transition exists between the first two chapters "Every Little Hurricane" and "A Drug Called Tradition"? What "tradition" (or traditions) is Alexie drawing our attention to (ie - family traditions, social traditions?), and how is this tradition like a drug? What effect has "tradition" had in Victor's life, as well as the people on the Spokane Reservation in general—positive, negative?

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