



One Book One New Paltz¹

War Dances by Sherman Alexie

Essential Questions²

- **How should humans respond to injustice, especially those injustices in the world that can no longer be righted?**
- Many of the pieces in the book involve sentimental remembrances of the past, but at one point nostalgia is referred to as a "false idol" (37). **What role does nostalgia play in our lives? Is it a helpful or harmful force in the world?**
- Many of the pieces also feature characters who identify the limitations of their identity or background, but are incapable of shedding this part of themselves. **How can our identities limit us? Are people capable of breaking free of their background and traditions if they choose to?**
- **Many of the stories feature parent/child relationships. Is it ever possible to "forgive our fathers?"**

Pre-Reading

1. Share prior knowledge of American Indians (Native Americans?) in United States history and current society.
2. Read/discuss "A Short History of the Spokane Indians"
<http://www.wellpinit.wednet.edu/shorthistory>
3. View/discuss *The History of the Native Americans' Lives* <http://www.5min.com/Video/The-History-of-the-Native-Americans-Lives-304220048>
4. View/discuss slideshow presentation about the Native American experience/ Sherman Alexie
5. Read/discuss excerpt of "What You Pawn I Will Redeem." (attached)
6. Read "How do we forgive our Fathers" by Dick Lourie (attached)

¹" **A Shared Reading Experience**

Gerald Benjamin founded the **One Book One New Paltz** project in 2005 as a way to build community among the university and the New Paltz community by sharing a reading experience. The goals of One Book One New Paltz are to promote reading and to build and celebrate community. One Book One New Paltz cultivates collaboration between community members and New Paltz educators to promote these goals. We welcome participation in the One Book event by people from varied backgrounds - from high school students to elders in our community." From <http://sites.google.com/site/onebookonenewpaltz/home>

² From *One Book One Philadelphia 2011*

http://libwww.freelibrary.org/onebook/obop11/1_Overview_and_Essential_Questions_WD.pdf

During Reading

1. Resonance Commentary

Pages 1—73 (“The Limited” through “Ode to Small-town Sweethearts”) due _____

Pages 75—149 (“The Senator’s Son” through “On Airplanes”) due _____

Pages 153—end (“Big Bang Theory through “Food Chain”) due _____

2. View *The Business of Fancydancing* or *Smoke Signals*

Post-Reading Choices

This assignment must be two-four word-processed, double-spaced pages with parenthetical citation from *War Dances* as well as from the provided text. You will need an MLA formatted Works Cited Page for these two sources. Create an argument and prove it.

Choice #1 Read the review of "War Dances" from the San Francisco Chronicle

http://articles.sfgate.com/2009-12-02/entertainment/20870561_1_story-sherman-alexie-ten-little-indians Respond to the review: Do you agree or disagree with their statements?

Choice #2 Read the excerpt from Sherman Alexie's interview with the publication "Modern American Poetry" http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/alexie/fraser.htm

Write a response: In what ways do his statements about writing and his style appear in *War Dances*? Choose one (or more) specific statements that he made, and show how this idea or issue appeared in the book.

Choice #3 When *War Dances* won the prestigious PEN/Faulkner award, the commentary provided by Al Young for the PEN organization stated:

*The honored book, War Dances, is a collection of structurally inventive pieces on the themes of love, betrayal, familial relationships, race, and class. The stories are interspersed with poems which refract their themes or topics. About this collection judge Al Young says, “War Dances taps every vein and nerve, every tissue, every issue that quickens the current blood-pulse: **parenthood, divorce, broken links, sex, gender and racial conflict, substance abuse, medical neglect, 9/11, Official Narrative vs. What Really Happened, settler religion vs. native spirituality; marketing, shopping, and war, war, war.** All the heartbreaking ways we don’t live now—this is the caring, eye-opening beauty of this rollicking, bittersweet gem of a book.”*

Choose one of the many ideas listed in the quote from Al Young, and discuss the underlying messages. Support your thesis with ample support from the text.

Sites to Visit

Sherman Alexie's Official Homepage: <http://www.fallsapart.com/index>

Spokane Tribe of Indians: <http://www.spokanetribe.com/reservation>

Native Languages of the Americas:

American Indian Literature <http://www.native-languages.org/literature.htm>

A Brief History of Native American Written

Literature http://faculty.weber.edu/kmackay/native_american_literature.htm

Reading Native American Literature:

A Teacher's Guide <https://secure.ncte.org/store/reading-native-american-literature>

EXCERPT

“What You Pawn I Will Redeem” by Sherman Alexie April 21, 2003 *The New Yorker Magazine*

NOON

One day you have a home and the next you don't, but I'm not going to tell you my particular reasons for being homeless, because it's my secret story, and Indians have to work hard to keep secrets from hungry white folks.

I'm a Spokane Indian boy, an Interior Salish, and my people have lived within a hundred-mile radius of Spokane, Washington, for at least ten thousand years. I grew up in Spokane, moved to Seattle twenty-three years ago for college, flunked out after two semesters, worked various blue- and bluer-collar jobs, married two or three times, fathered two or three kids, and then went crazy. Of course, crazy is not the official definition of my mental problem, but I don't think asocial disorder fits it, either, because that makes me sound like I'm a serial killer or something. I've never hurt another human being, or, at least, not physically. I've broken a few hearts in my time, but we've all done that, so I'm nothing special in that regard. I'm a boring heartbreaker, too. I never dated or married more than one woman at a time. I didn't break hearts into pieces overnight. I broke them slowly and carefully. And I didn't set any land-speed records running out the door. Piece by piece, I disappeared. I've been disappearing ever since.

I've been homeless for six years now. If there's such a thing as an effective homeless man, then I suppose I'm effective. Being homeless is probably the only thing I've ever been good at. I know where to get the best free food. I've made friends with restaurant and convenience-store managers who let me use their bathrooms. And I don't mean the public bathrooms, either. I mean the employees' bathrooms, the clean ones hidden behind the kitchen or the pantry or the cooler. I know it sounds strange to be proud of this, but it means a lot to me, being trustworthy enough to piss in somebody else's clean bathroom. Maybe you don't understand the value of a clean bathroom, but I do.

Probably none of this interests you. Homeless Indians are everywhere in Seattle. We're common and boring, and you walk right on by us, with maybe a look of anger or disgust or even sadness at the terrible fate of the noble savage. But we have dreams and families. I'm friends with a homeless Plains Indian man whose son is the editor of a big-time newspaper back East. Of course, that's his story, but we Indians are great storytellers and liars and mythmakers, so maybe that Plains Indian hobo is just a plain old everyday Indian. I'm kind of suspicious of him, because he identifies himself only as Plains Indian, a generic term, and not by a specific tribe. When I asked him why he wouldn't tell me exactly what he is, he said, "Do any of us know exactly what we are?" Yeah, great, a philosophizing Indian. "Hey," I said, "you got to have a home to be that homely." He just laughed and flipped me the eagle and walked away.

I wander the streets with a regular crew—my teammates, my defenders, my posse. It's Rose of Sharon, Junior, and me. We matter to each other if we don't matter to anybody else. Rose of Sharon is a big woman, about seven feet tall if you're measuring over-all effect and about five feet tall if you're only talking about the physical. She's a Yakama Indian of the Wishram variety. Junior is a Colville, but there are about a hundred and ninety-nine tribes that make up the Colville, so he could be anything. He's good-looking, though, like he just stepped out of some "Don't Litter the Earth" public-service advertisement. He's got those great big cheekbones that are like planets, you know, with little moons orbiting them. He gets me jealous, jealous, and jealous. If you put Junior and me next to each other, he's the Before Columbus Arrived Indian and I'm the After Columbus Arrived Indian. I am living proof of the horrible damage that colonialism has done to us Skins. But I'm not going to let you know how scared I sometimes get of history and its ways. I'm a strong man, and I know that silence is the best method of dealing with white folks.

This whole story really started at lunchtime, when Rose of Sharon, Junior, and I were panning the handle down at Pike Place Market. After about two hours of negotiating, we earned five dollars—good enough for a bottle of fortified courage from the most beautiful 7-Eleven in the world. So we headed over that way, feeling like warrior drunks, and we walked past this pawnshop I'd never noticed before. And that was strange, because we Indians have built-in pawnshop radar. But the strangest thing of all was the old powwow-dance regalia I saw hanging in the window.

"That's my grandmother's regalia," I said to Rose of Sharon and Junior.

"How you know for sure?" Junior asked.

I didn't know for sure, because I hadn't seen that regalia in person ever. I'd only seen photographs of my grandmother dancing in it. And those were taken before somebody stole it from her, fifty years ago. But it sure looked like my memory of it, and it had all the same color feathers and beads that my family sewed into our powwow regalia.

"There's only one way to know for sure," I said.

So Rose of Sharon, Junior, and I walked into the pawnshop and greeted the old white man working behind the counter.

“How can I help you?” he asked.

“That’s my grandmother’s powwow regalia in your window,” I said. “Somebody stole it from her fifty years ago, and my family has been searching for it ever since.”

The pawnbroker looked at me like I was a liar. I understood. Pawnshops are filled with liars.

“I’m not lying,” I said. “Ask my friends here. They’ll tell you.”

“He’s the most honest Indian I know,” Rose of Sharon said.

“All right, honest Indian,” the pawnbroker said. “I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt. Can you prove it’s your grandmother’s regalia?”

Because they don’t want to be perfect, because only God is perfect, Indian people sew flaws into their powwow regalia. My family always sewed one yellow bead somewhere on our regalia. But we always hid it so that you had to search really hard to find it.

“If it really is my grandmother’s,” I said, “there will be one yellow bead hidden somewhere on it.”

“All right, then,” the pawnbroker said. “Let’s take a look.”

He pulled the regalia out of the window, laid it down on the glass counter, and we searched for that yellow bead and found it hidden beneath the armpit.

“There it is,” the pawnbroker said. He didn’t sound surprised. “You were right. This is your grandmother’s regalia.”

“It’s been missing for fifty years,” Junior said.

“Hey, Junior,” I said. “It’s my family’s story. Let me tell it.”

“All right,” he said. “I apologize. You go ahead.”

“It’s been missing for fifty years,” I said.

“That’s his family’s sad story,” Rose of Sharon said. “Are you going to give it back to him?”

“That would be the right thing to do,” the pawnbroker said. “But I can’t afford to do the right thing. I paid a thousand dollars for this. I can’t just give away a thousand dollars.”

“We could go to the cops and tell them it was stolen,” Rose of Sharon said.

“Hey,” I said to her. “Don’t go threatening people.”

The pawnbroker sighed. He was thinking about the possibilities.

“Well, I suppose you could go to the cops,” he said. “But I don’t think they’d believe a word you said.”

He sounded sad about that. As if he was sorry for taking advantage of our disadvantages.

“What’s your name?” the pawnbroker asked me.

“Jackson,” I said.

“Is that first or last?”

“Both,” I said.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, it’s true. My mother and father named me Jackson Jackson. My family nickname is Jackson Squared. My family is funny.”

“All right, Jackson Jackson,” the pawnbroker said. “You wouldn’t happen to have a thousand dollars, would you?”

“We’ve got five dollars total,” I said.

“That’s too bad,” he said, and thought hard about the possibilities. “I’d sell it to you for a thousand dollars if you had it. Heck, to make it fair, I’d sell it to you for nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars. I’d lose a dollar. That would be the moral thing to do in this case. To lose a dollar would be the right thing.”

“We’ve got five dollars total,” I said again.

“That’s too bad,” he said once more, and thought harder about the possibilities. “How about this? I’ll give you twenty-four hours to come up with nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars. You come back here at lunchtime tomorrow with the money and I’ll sell it back to you. How does that sound?”

“It sounds all right,” I said.

“All right, then,” he said. “We have a deal. And I’ll get you started. Here’s twenty bucks.”

He opened up his wallet and pulled out a crisp twenty-dollar bill and gave it to me. And Rose of Sharon, Junior, and I walked out into the daylight to search for nine hundred and seventy-four more dollars.

Read more http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/04/21/030421fi_fiction#ixzz1RSvFB2Wh

“How do we forgive our Fathers?”

Dick Lourie

How do we forgive our Fathers?

Maybe in a dream

Do we forgive our Fathers for leaving us too often or forever
when we were little?

Maybe for scaring us with unexpected rage

or making us nervous

because there never seemed to be any rage there at all.

Do we forgive our Fathers for marrying or not marrying our Mothers?

For Divorcing or not divorcing our Mothers?

And shall we forgive them for their excesses of warmth or coldness?

Shall we forgive them for pushing or leaning

for shutting doors

for speaking through walls

or never speaking

or never being silent?

Do we forgive our Fathers in our age or in theirs

or their deaths

saying it to them or not saying it?

If we forgive our Fathers what is left?

* This poem is read during the last scene in ***Smoke Signals***. It was originally published in a longer version titled “Forgiving Our Fathers” in a book of poems titled *Ghost Radio* published by Hanging Loose Press in 1998

Video version of the poem from YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OB0RgMcB8zc>