

SHERMAN ALEXIE

*Reservation  
Blues*



"An important voice in American literature."

—*The Boston Globe*

In the one hundred and eleven years since the creation of the Spokane Indian Reservation in 1881, not one person, Indian or otherwise, had ever arrived there by accident. Wellpinit, the only town on the reservation, did not exist on most maps, so the black stranger surprised the whole tribe when he appeared with nothing more than the suit he wore and the guitar slung over his back. As Simon drove backward into town, he first noticed the black man standing beside the faded WELCOME TO WELLPINIT, POPULATION: VARIABLE sign. Lester Falls Apart slept under that sign and dreamed about the stranger before anyone else had a chance. That black man walked past the Assembly of God Church, the Catholic Church and Cemetery, the Presbyterian Church and Cemetery. He strolled to the crossroads near the softball diamond, with its solitary grave hidden in deep center field. The black man leaned his guitar against a stop sign but stood himself straight and waited.

The entire reservation knew about the black man five minutes after he showed up at the crossroads. All the Spokanes thought up reasons to leave work or home so they could drive down to look the stranger over. A small man with very dark skin and huge hands, he wore a brown suit that looked good from a distance but grew more ragged, frayed at the cuffs, as he came into focus. The black man waved at every Indian that drove by, but nobody had the courage to stop, until Thomas Builds-the-Fire pulled up in his old blue van.

“Ya-hey,” Thomas called out.

“Hey,” the black man said.

“Are you lost?”

“Been lost a while, I suppose.”

“You know where you’re at?”

“At the crossroad,” the black man said, but his words sounded like stones in his mouth and coals in his stomach.

“This is the Spokane Indian Reservation,” Thomas said.

“Indians? I ain’t seen many Indians.”

Thomas parked his van and jumped out. Although the Spokanes were mostly a light-skinned tribe, Thomas tanned to a deep brown, nearly dark as the black man. With his long, black hair pulled into braids, he looked like an old-time salmon fisherman: short, muscular legs for the low center of gravity, long torso and arms for the leverage to throw the spear. Just a few days past thirty-two, he carried a slightly protruding belly that he’d had when he was eight years old and would still have when he was eighty. He wasn’t ugly, though, just marked by loneliness, like some red *L* was tattooed on his forehead. Indian women had never paid much attention to him, because he didn’t pretend to be some twentieth-century warrior, alternating between blind rage and feigned disinterest. He was neither loud nor aggressive, neither calm nor silent. He walked up to the black man and offered his hand, but the stranger kept his hands at his sides, out of view, hidden.

“I’m careful with my hands,” the black man said. “He might hear me if I use my hands.”

“Who might hear you?”

“The Gentleman.”

Thomas wanted to know more about the Gentleman, but he was too polite and traditional to ask and refused to offend the black man with personal questions that early in the relationship. Traditional Spokanes believe in rules of conduct that aren’t collected into any book and have been forgotten by most of the tribe. For thousands of years, the Spokanes feasted, danced, conducted conversations, and courted each other in certain ways. Most Indi-

ans don't follow those rules anymore, but Thomas made the attempt.

"What's your name?" the black man asked after a long silence.

"Thomas Builds-the-Fire."

"That a good name?"

"I don't know. I think so."

"My name's Johnson," the black man said. "Robert Johnson."

"It's good to meet you, Mr. Johnson. Who's your traveling partner?"

Johnson picked up his guitar, held it close to his body.

"My best friend," Johnson said. "But I ain't gonna tell y'all his name. The Gentleman might hear and come runnin'. He gets into the strings, you hear?"

Thomas saw that Robert Johnson looked scared and tired, in need of a shower, a good night's rest, and a few stories to fill his stomach.

"How'd you end up here?" Thomas asked. A crowd of Indian kids had gathered, because crowds of Indian kids are always gathering somewhere, to watch Thomas Builds-the-Fire, the misfit storyteller of the Spokane Tribe, talk to a strange black man and his guitar. The whole event required the construction of another historical monument. The reservation had filled with those monuments years ago, but the Tribal Council still looked to build more, because they received government grants to do exactly that.

"Been lookin' for a woman," Johnson said. "I dream 'bout her."

"What woman?"

"Old woman lives on a hill. I think she can fix what's wrong with me."

"What's wrong with you?" Thomas asked.

**“Quiet, powerful . . . brilliant, deeply moving . . . [Sherman Alexie] is funny, he is perceptive, and he knows how to stir us in large and small ways.”** —FREDERICK BUSCH, *THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*

**WINNER OF THE AMERICAN BOOK AWARD  
AND THE MURRAY MORGAN PRIZE**

Sherman Alexie has been hailed as “one of the best writers we have” (*The Nation*). *Reservation Blues* is his “irresistibly stunning debut novel” (*San Francisco Chronicle*). One day legendary bluesman Robert Johnson appears on the Spokane Indian reservation, in flight from the devil and presumed long dead. When he passes his enchanted instrument to Thomas-Builds-the-Fire—storyteller, misfit, and musician—a magical odyssey begins that will take them from reservation bars to small-town taverns, from the cement trails of Seattle to the concrete canyons of Manhattan. This is a fresh, luxuriantly comic tale of power, tragedy, and redemption among contemporary Native Americans.

**“The mystical complexity of *Reservation Blues* is as mesmerizing as the poetic power of Alexie’s writing. . . . Generously laced with bleak and sometimes wacky humor, but none of that detracts from the book’s poignant theme.”** —*SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE*

**“Scathingly funny . . . *Reservation Blues* never misses a beat, never sounds a false note.”** —*LOS ANGELES TIMES*

**SHERMAN ALEXIE** is the author of *Reservation Blues*, *Indian Killer*, *The Toughest Indian in the World*, and *Ten Little Indians*. He wrote and directed *The Business of Fancydancing* and also wrote the award-winning screenplay for *Smoke Signals*, a film based on his short-story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. His books have won numerous awards and have been selected for *People’s* “Best of” pages and *The New York Times* Notable Books of the Year.

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