Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven by Sherman Alexie

Brilliant, Bittersweet Tales Of Latter-Day Amerindian Life

A series of linked stories, told in different voices, about contemporary Red Indian life.

My Personal Review:
This is my personal measure of Sherman Alexie, the gifted young Spokane/Coeur dAlene Indian writer: He caught my attention in a recently rebroadcast 60 Minutes feature story. What appealed to me was his sardonic wit--edgy, thoughtful, ironic, challenging, and, yes, I thought, a bit sad. I told myself, Lets see if he can really write, lets see what hes got to say. So I pick up one of his books of prose; within a week, I had read three. This outstanding collection of interrelated stories was the first. Very, very impressive! I loved his writing, his crisp, bone simple and straight style. I felt for his finely etched characters, a handful of them--especially one named Victor, presumably the authors stand-in--recurring throughout. And these are all stories with bite.

Maybe hunger informs our lives, says the narrating voice of Family Portrait. Roughly the first half of this book exposes us to what it means to be Native American today: The spoils of defeat--the tight-lipped, self-destructive despair of a once proud, historic people reduced to segregated conditions. Isolated from the white world, isolated from their own traditions. Subject to poor housing, education and food, chronic unemployment, rampant alcoholism, diabetes, blood fights and bloody ends. Alexies sharp depictions of conflicted identity, uncertainty in the everyday and lifelong struggles for survival on the Spokane Indian reservation, the contradictory capacities for tenderness and tragedy, beauty and brutality, breaks down our detachment, jars us into realizing both the unique and common human attributes of his people. What he induces is simply called empathy. As another who grew up in a reservation--the urban ghetto--I felt that same incoherent rage that plagues so many of his characters. In the commonweal of pain, it was a further demonstration that you can take the boy out of the country, but you cant take the country out of the boy. Yeah, okay--empathy.

At the halfway point, I was ready to start writing this review--no question, Alexie had shown he had the literary goods and I wanted to proclaim it--but something told me, first finish the book. Good thing. Why? Because he tricked me--he still held an ace up his storytelling sleeve.
Hope feeds among the tombs, Melville wrote. Always darkest before the daylight, goes the tireless adage we've all heard somewhere from our elders. That's how I do this life sometimes by making the ordinary just like magic, says the narrator in one of Alexie's stories (Jesus Christ's Brother is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation). Every Indian learns how to be a magician and learns how to misdirect attention and the dark hand is always quicker than the white eye . . . no matter how close you get to my heart you will never find out my secrets and I'll never tell you and I'll never show you the same trick twice.

Might be Alexie begins his sleight of hand with the (deliberately) Kafka-esque tale of the trial of Thomas Builds-the-fire, misfit storyteller who can still feel the pulse of tradition within him and stubbornly refuses to disown it. (Hmm. Defiance.) Then there's A Good Story, about the loving, mutually respectful relationship between an old man and a boy. Or the story about the Indian married couple who reconcile after the wife has left her wise-cracking husband for making one joke too many about his terminal cancer. (Hmm. Redemption!) Or the character arc of Victor--whose name, keep in mind, means conqueror--over an array of first and third person narratives, as he struggles against the pull of his parents drunken, broken marriage; resenting his father's departure; the low expectations of Indian schooling; the high expectations of being a local hero; incipient alcoholism; the fear of and yearning for love. The Alexie magic is in balancing the bitter with the sweet; showing us that in the midst of desolation there is also room for resilience, for humor, for trust--for hope.

It was during this time I happened to see a repeat of Chris Rock's last HBO special, the one where he advises those folks who are always popping off in the media about how bad their people have it now in this country--how they're losing America--to just shut up. Nobody has it worse than the Indians, he says. They're all dead!

No, not quite, Chris. Deliberately wounded by long-standing government policy, yes. Demonized and ignored by a dominant history, yes. Suffering, yes. But they still survive, human as the rest of us--with faults, foibles, and feelings, nightmares and dreams--and they're championed by one of their own, a writer with a singular voice who tells modern day Indian stories with clarity, style, perception and wit. This book opens a door to consciousness. A highly recommended read.

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