

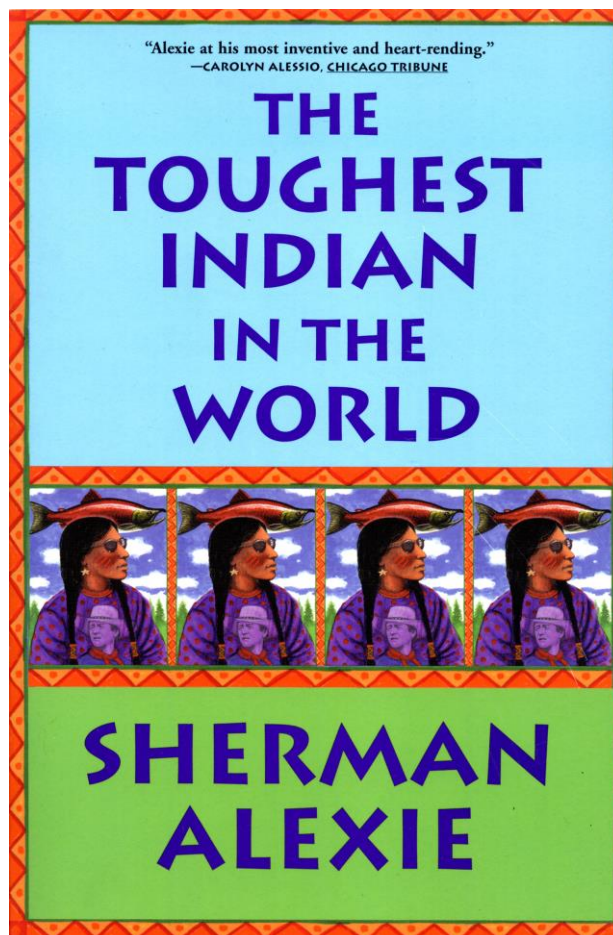
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

The Toughest Indian in the World

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by Julie Bolt



THE TOUGHEST INDIAN IN THE WORLD. SHERMAN ALEXIE. (GROVE PRESS, 2001).

***The Toughest Indian in the World.* Sherman Alexie. Grove Press.**

The students in my required college literature classes are bright and highly diverse, yet they often fall into the trap of thinking about racial and sexual identity in stereotypical terms. A great tool for complicating the issue of identity is the second of Sherman Alexie's three short story collections, *The Toughest Indian in the World*. In the stories, Spokane Indian characters continually challenge students' media-formed assumptions. Here basketball takes predominance over the sweat lodge, a sexual encounter with a gay boxer connects a young man to a sacred collective past, and John Wayne is in touch with his feminine side.

Students easily identify with Alexie's accessible language, caustic humor, and pop-culture imagery. Resistant readers are almost always sucked in. However, students soon find themselves on shifting ground as they struggle with their own notions of "Indian-ness" by projecting stereotypes of alcoholism and mysticism. It is easy to question these projections through characters that do not have cookie-cutter responses to the racist and romantic constructions of Indian identity in millennium America. Instead, the characters surprise students through their self-deprecating discourse, conflicting loyalties, self-doubt, doubt of others, and unpredictable acts (large and small) of courage and love.

I find the title story from *The Toughest Indian in the World* especially interesting, as it takes on the homophobia of many of my students. In the story, a middle-class Spokane journalist picks up an Indian hitchhiker so as to feel closer to the very culture he has distanced himself from. The hitchhiker is a brawny street boxer and the protagonist idealizes him as a warrior. When their casual banter morphs into a sexual encounter, students must contend with its spiritual significance: the protagonist, from a salmon tribe, returns barefoot upriver to the reservation. Has he discovered his sexual identity? Has he inadvertently been given the gift of cultural reconnection? During discussion, students contrast their homophobic stereotyping with the striking symbolism in the story, and often find themselves rethinking their initial reactions.

Alexie also takes on academic appropriation of Indian identity. In the final story "One Good Man," a "Cherokee-Choctaw-Seminole-Irish-Russian" professor, who actually appears to be primarily of European descent, repeatedly asks his class the question, "What is an Indian!" The question is posed as if there is textbook response. The professor is challenged by a Spokane student's father who claims, "I can see a little bit of that aboriginal bone structure in your face, but you ain't Indian. No. You might even hang out with some Indians or get a little of the ha-ha when one of the women is feeling sorry for you. But you ain't Indian.

No. You might be Native American but you sure as hell ain't Indian."

When the professor counters that he was at the American Indian movement occupation at Alcatraz, the Spokane father says that on that day, "I took my wife and kids to the Pacific Ocean, just off Neah Bay. Most beautiful place in the world." The professor then counters with the Wounded Knee occupation: "Where were you?" The father replies, "I was teaching my son to ride his bike. Took forever. And when he finally did it, man, I cried like a baby, I was so proud." Here students encounter the contrast between a racially-constructed version of identity and a human one.

Over the course of reading the book, some of the questions that students raise are: Does Alexie want us to understand his culture? Why does he share some cultural and psychological insights, but not others? What audience are his stories written for? Does he hate white people? Why does sexual politics become a metaphor for identity politics?

Because of the nuance of the characters, students produce a diversity of interpretations. By drawing attention to the varied emotional and ideological responses, and examining them, a more layered view of identity is discovered. As Alexie makes students laugh, shocks them, and subverts their stereotypes, a fixed notion of identity is replaced with one that is hybrid and multidirectional. And, I believe, more humanizing.

What is an Indian? These stories critique the very question.



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