

# SHERMAN ALEXIE

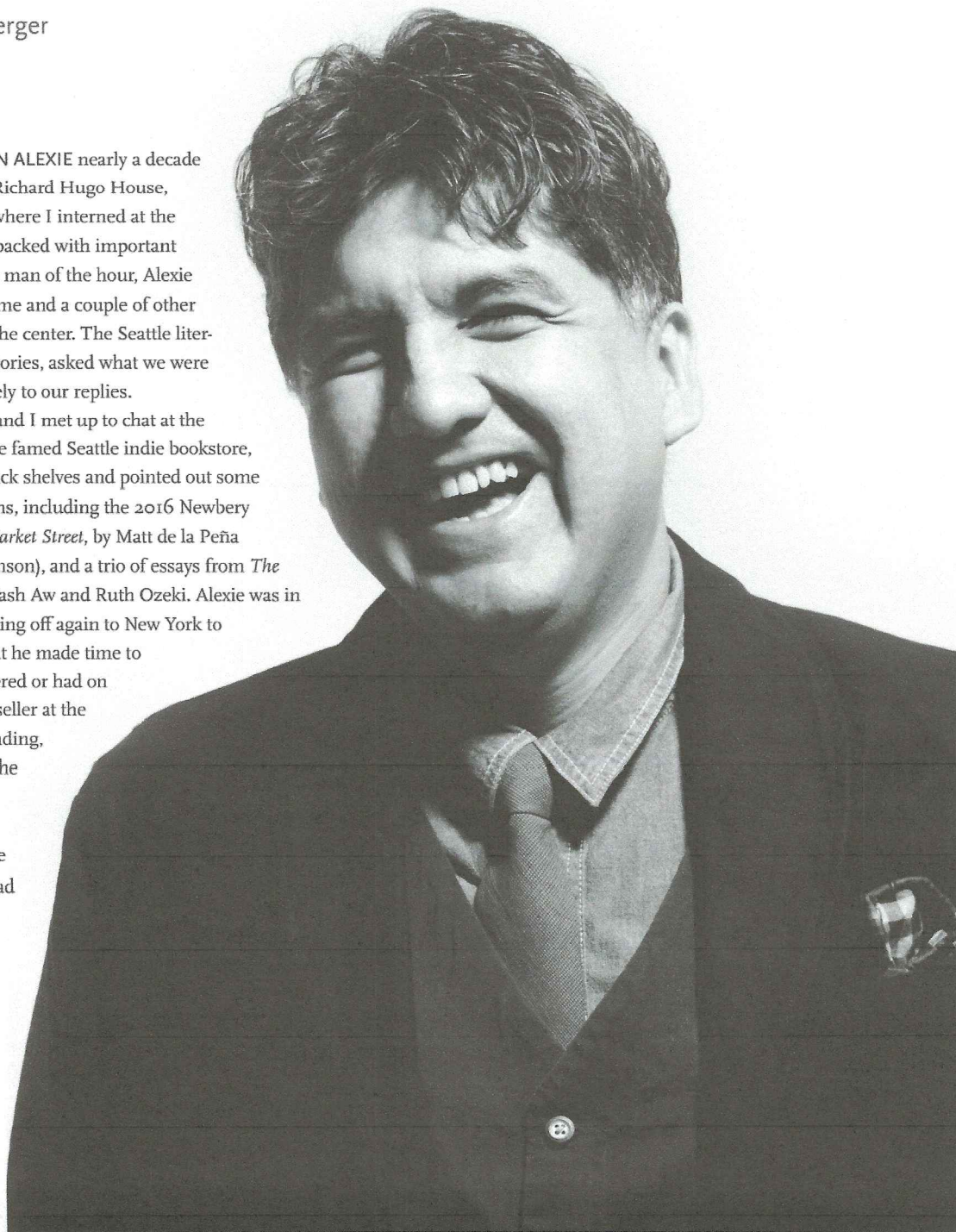
## A LIFE BUILT ON STORIES

By Kristianne Huntsberger

I FIRST MET SHERMAN ALEXIE nearly a decade ago at a reception hosted by Richard Hugo House, the writing center in Seattle where I interned at the time. Though the room was packed with important people, all eager to talk to the man of the hour, Alexie seemed content to chat with me and a couple of other young writers involved with the center. The Seattle literary icon joked with us, told stories, asked what we were reading and listened attentively to our replies.

This spring, when Alexie and I met up to chat at the Elliott Bay Book Company, the famed Seattle indie bookstore, he walked me through the thick shelves and pointed out some of his recent recommendations, including the 2016 Newbery Medal winner, *Last Stop on Market Street*, by Matt de la Peña (illustrated by Christian Robinson), and a trio of essays from *The Face* series, by Chris Abani, Tash Aw and Ruth Ozeki. Alexie was in Seattle only briefly before setting off again to New York to appear on *The Daily Show*, but he made time to pick up some books he'd ordered or had on his mind. He asked the bookseller at the front counter what he was reading, and the young man told him he had just begun *Jesus' Son* by Denis Johnson.

"For the first time?" Alexie exclaimed. "I wish I could read that again for the first time." The two men chatted and exchanged recommendations. In that moment, Alexie was not the celebrated writer, filmmaker and public speaker, but a reader at home among fellow readers.

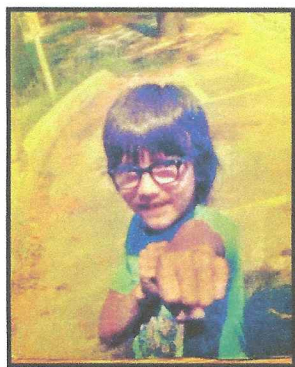




Alexie seems equally at home onstage. In May, a large audience gathered in the Four Seasons Hotel Ballroom in downtown Seattle to see him and to support the Seattle Children's PlayGarden, an activity center for children of all abilities. Alexie wore his thick hair cut close, and he was sporting a dark blazer and a contagious smile. He explained that Executive Director Liz Bullard was his older son's speech therapist and that the PlayGarden was pivotal to the boy's growth and development: "It's through Liz and the PlayGarden that our son [now in his teens] played and played and became this *man*. It is through play that we become complicated human beings."

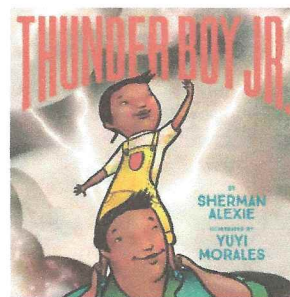
As a Native American from a poor community who was saddled in youth with a speech impediment, bipolar disorder and hydrocephalus (an accumulation of excess fluid in the brain), Alexie has experience with barriers that might feel insurmountable. But, as the recipient of the National Book Award (for *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, published in 2007) and the PEN/Faulkner Award (for *War Dances*, published in 2009), he is proof of the potential to overcome. His writings tackle tough topics and infuse them with optimism and humor.

I feel a special connection to Alexie's work. When I taught in Myanmar, I had few resources, but I did have old issues of *The New Yorker* magazine, and in one was Alexie's 2003 story *What You Pawn I Will Redeem*.



FALLSPART PRODUCTIONS

Sherman Alexie (shown above as a young boy) has said that books had an effect on him from an early age. His most recent book, *Thunder Boy Jr.*, is a picture book with a Native American protagonist.



The college-age English-language learners I taught loved the story, which followed the homeless Native American hero's 24-hour quest across Seattle. For all the difficulties the story revealed about the lives of Native and homeless people, it also inspired laughter and engaged classroom discussions. My students, many of whom were from underprivileged minority groups in Myanmar, admired the hero's humor, generosity and perseverance. They decided that those qualities made up for his other flaws.

Alexie embraces his own flaws publicly in his books, talks and popular Twitter feed. He's more comfortable with the messiness of life than with the tyranny of perfection: "As a parent, I get angry when I see TV parents lying about how organized they are," Alexie says of sitcom and reality-TV family models. "And even if they are so perfectly organized, that's even more of a sickness than my chaotic life."

Though Alexie's work keeps him traveling frequently for book events and talks—often for schools, or organizations devoted to serving children and minorities of varied race, class, ability, religion or sexuality—he

makes a point of connecting with his family. Sometimes it's a matter of just being in the same room together, he says, even if he and his wife and his two sons are doing their own things. Because there is no way to

achieve perfection in everything, a person has to make choices, he says. "The better you are as a parent, the less you will write. And I think I've been a good father. I have happily traded thousands of pages of work to be more fully present in my children's lives."

Being a parent has made Alexie aware of his effect on the world and how important it is to choose how to engage. "I want to be a father and a writer and an activist in all the same way," he tells me, "with 70 percent love and 30 percent cynicism."

## INFLUENTIAL BOOKS

*Sherman Alexie says that most people's favorite books include things they read before age 16. The following are some of the books that were influential to him when he was young.*

— ***The Snowy Day***, by Ezra Jack Keats. Alexie has said that this is the book that made him a writer. He told National Public Radio earlier this year that the pioneering book with a person of color as protagonist showed him "there was another person in the world who was like me."

— ***The Grapes of Wrath***, by John Steinbeck. Alexie cites this classic as an early influence, which—to many people's surprise at the time—he read before he was 5.

— ***It***, by Stephen King. "The hero has a speech impediment, a stutter, and I have a speech impediment," Alexie notes. "To have a heroic speech-impaired kid is pretty awesome."

— ***Rifles for Watie***, by Harold Keith. "About the Civil War and a Cherokee Indian who is actually a gun runner for the South. I loved this one growing up. It was the first book I'd seen where a Native American was fully involved in huge events. I didn't even know that; nobody ever taught us that."

— **Comic books**, especially *Superman* and *Batman* comics. "I also got made fun of because I loved *Archie*." —K.H.



SHERMAN  
ALEXIE

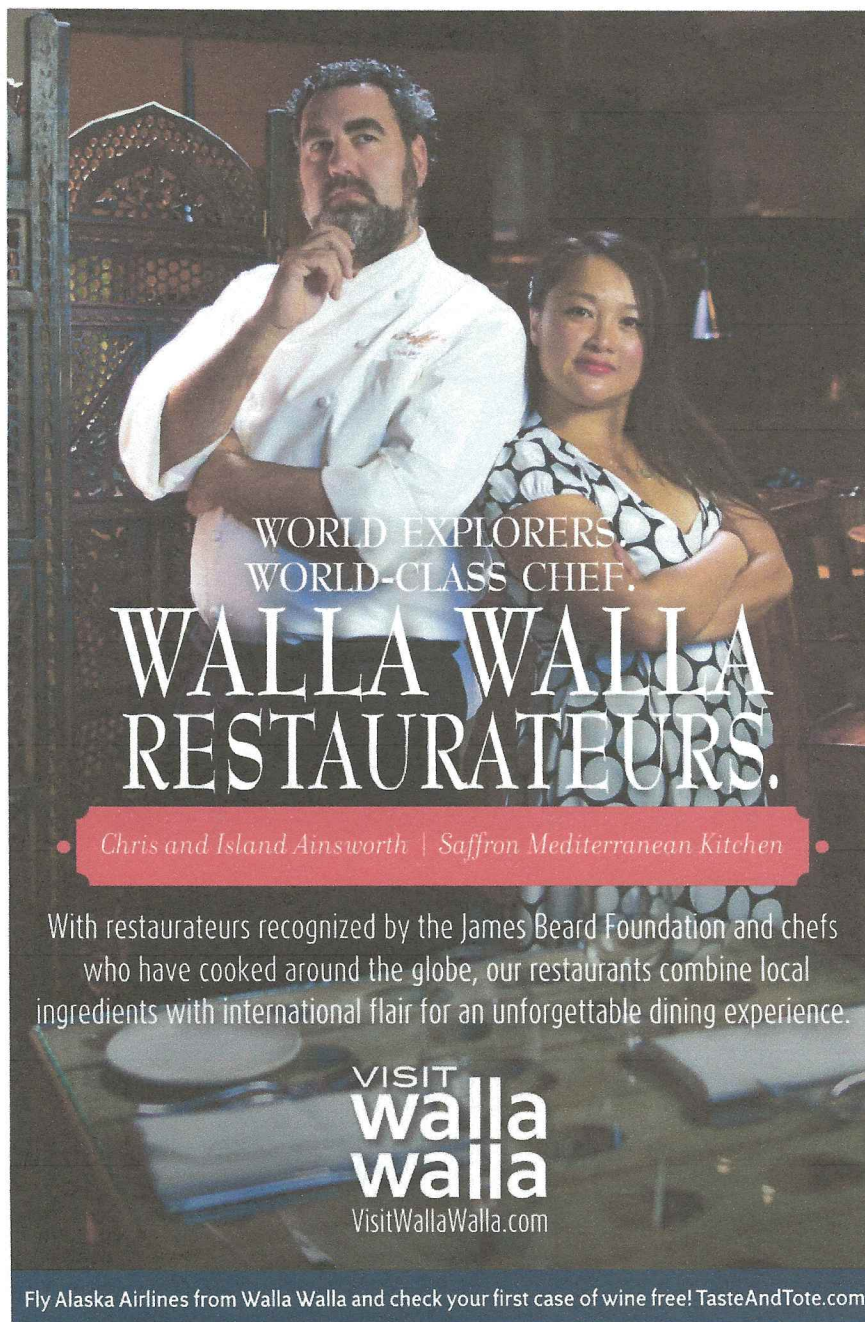
He finds this balance onstage in his signature storytelling that mixes sincerity with irreverence, all infused with humor. He kept the audience at the Seattle Children's PlayGarden luncheon laughing with him even when he was sharing a story about his recent brain surgery, the successful removal of a noncancerous tumor. In the groggy relief he felt waking after the surgery, he realized that what he'd been worried about most was losing language: "My surgeon, who is East Indian, was in the room, and—I'd been saving this for him—I said: 'I bet this is the first time an Indian has ever scalped an Indian.'" The audience seated at tables in the ballroom laughed.

"Now, some of you groan, some of you laugh," Alexie continued. "But I got no response from him. And I thought, 'Oh no, maybe I just *thought* I was speaking. Are the words gone? Nobody had a reaction to what I just said.'"

He explained the relief he felt when his wife leaned over and noted what he'd forgotten in a fog of anesthesia: "She said, 'Sherman, you've told that joke 11 times.'"

Words are Alexie's life, and he is an indefatigable champion of books and independent bookstores. Alexie is credited with starting the Indies First campaign that turns authors into booksellers at local bookstores on Small Business Saturday each November. The program began, Alexie says, because he was at his son's baseball game and forgot he was supposed to give a reading at the Queen Anne Book Company. He and the store's owners set up a day for Alexie to instead come in and sell books and talk to customers. The idea was picked up by the American Booksellers Association and went national. Alexie is happy to see independent stores thriving.

"I was one of the Chicken Littles about e-books," he says, referring to his initial wariness about electronic reading



WORLD EXPLORERS  
WORLD-CLASS CHEF.

# WALLA WALLA RESTAURATEURS.

Chris and Island Ainsworth | Saffron Mediterranean Kitchen

With restaurateurs recognized by the James Beard Foundation and chefs who have cooked around the globe, our restaurants combine local ingredients with international flair for an unforgettable dining experience.

VISIT  
**walla  
walla**  
VisitWallaWalla.com

Fly Alaska Airlines from Walla Walla and check your first case of wine free! TasteAndTote.com

## Voted Best Sports Bar

Across from the Space Needle.

**\$3** Local  
Craft  
Pint

When you bring in or mention this ad.  
(one per customer)

140 4th Ave. N., Suite 130    206.404.7767    [www.sportrestaurant.com](http://www.sportrestaurant.com)





Alexie's newest book, *Thunder Boy Jr.*, illustrated by Yuyi Morales, is Alexie's first children's picture book. The titular hero is named after his father but wants his own identity. Touching on Native American naming traditions, personal exploration and father-son relationships, the book was released in time for Father's Day 2016. Alexie says he had not timed it that way, though. "Seven Father's Days have passed while I was writing it," he explains. "It was hard to write. I thought because I wrote poetry, it would be easy, but it wasn't. It's that mixed audience, where you're writing for the kid and the parent, because you want the parent not to go crazy reading the book over and over again."

When he was young, Alexie was called Junior, but he also had other nicknames. His father called him "Regret," after Paul Regret, his father's favorite character in a Western movie: "It was the tilt of [the character's] chin. That's what Dad said. So, apparently, I was tilting my chin like a gunfighter when I was 2." Alexie admits that he was a fighter, too: "I stood up against everybody all the time," he says.

# ALASKA MINT

(907) 278-8414 • 1-800-770-6468

[www.alaskamint.com](http://www.alaskamint.com)





## SHERMAN ALEXIE

tered barriers tied to “race, class, culture and fear of the other—on all sides,” he says. “It was a town you didn’t even stop in as an Indian, because of the perceived animosity,” he says.

Alexie chronicles the experience in his semiautobiographical Young Adult novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Later, Alexie moved farther away: to Spokane, for college, and then even farther, to Seattle, before marrying his wife (whom he had met in Spokane).

“We fell in love, and she wanted a big-city. The choices were Seattle, Portland or San Francisco,” he says.

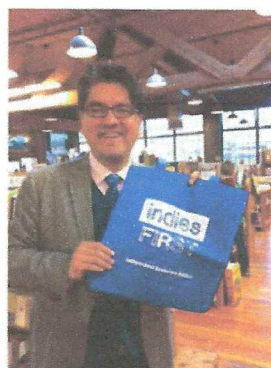
He chose the closest city, and “as soon as I was in Seattle, I felt more comfortable with my life.” Counter to the popular idea of finding yourself in nature, he says he discovered himself in whole-wheat croissants

and the Sunday newspaper bought at the corner store.

“I need airplanes flying overhead,” he says. “I need random shouts, sirens, fog-horns and ship horns. I don’t need to talk to people, but I need people to be around.”

When he left the reservation, he used the name he shared with his father. “In fact, when Dad was in the hospital, nurses and doctors would see his name and assume it was me,” Alexie says. “He signed books of mine over the years.”

Alexie’s father also went to school off the reservation. Even in his isolation as the only Native American, he succeeded academically and socially. Alexie wonders whether his father’s story could have been more like



KAREN MAEDA ALLMAN

Alexie supports independent booksellers such as the Elliott Bay Book Company in Seattle.

his own, were it not for “the booze, and the depression and the fact that Indians didn’t go to college then. It wasn’t even a possibility.”

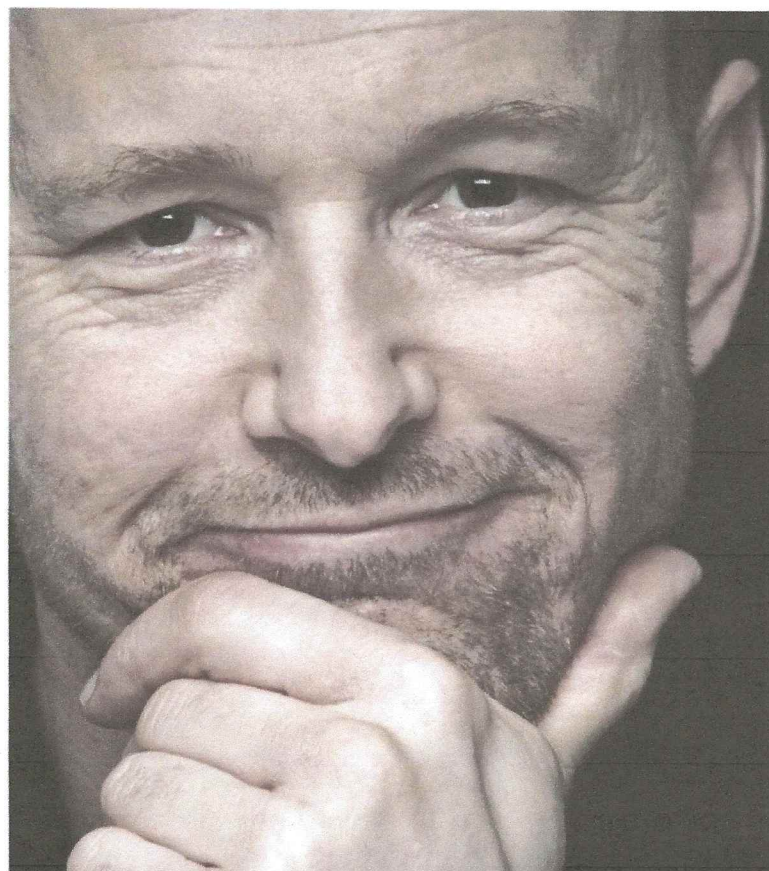
Alexie felt vilified when he chose to attend school off the reservation, but he says that it helped

open possibilities for the next generation.

Success like his does not necessarily come at the expense of tradition, Alexie says, but he also feels that tradition should be scrutinized, and allowed to change. We’ll ultimately hold on to the best parts, he says.

“What I live my life with is storytelling at all times, and tolerance, and celebration of the eccentric.”

He remembers a period from his career



Are you getting  
the **most**  
out of Microsoft  
Dynamics?

**Fine Solutions** can show you how.

Schedule your **FREE** discovery.

**Contact us today**

877-777-3463 • [www.fine.com](http://www.fine.com)





when he was starting to travel and gain fame—and facing criticism from other Native Americans that what he was doing was somehow not Indian enough.

“I was onstage once talking, and I realized: I travel the world telling stories. My entire life is built on storytelling. I pay my mortgage because of stories. *I’m the traditional one!*”

Alexie sees his sons carrying on traditions in their own ways, too: The first is an Eagle Scout, and the second is in a choir. “Is it really all that different than berry picking and powwows?” Alexie asks.

Alexie evidently thought carefully about younger generations as he worked on his recent book. He tells me that writing books for kids who don’t have many books written for them is a political act. “The quality of your life is proportional to the number of books you’ve read—the number of books in your house,” Alexie believes.

He feels that there should be more books for kids who are underrepresented, with heroes who look familiar, have familiar lives and have positive experiences. For this reason, it was important for Alexie that *Thunder Boy Jr.* show an intact and loving Native family scenario in which “the search for identity is a joyous thing, rather than something born out of desperation—where it’s about becoming who you are and not about survival.”

The chance to create positive models is why Alexie writes for children and why he is involved in community work, such as with the Seattle Children’s PlayGarden.

Alexie wants to help young people see all their options. “I grew up feeling hopeless and helpless,” Alexie confesses. “I can’t make these kids’ decisions, but I can show them options.” ▲

*Kristianne Huntsberger writes from Seattle. Sherman Alexie’s memoir, You Don’t Have to Say You Love Me, is due out in 2017. Learn more about Alexie at fallsapart.com.*



Every day, the American Red Cross helps people prepare for, respond to and recover from every imaginable disaster. Whether it’s a home fire or flood, wildfire or winter storm, the generosity of our Northwest Region Ready 365 partners makes this possible—365 days a year.



Ready 365 partners are a select group of businesses that value the local impact and global reach of the Red Cross, have a deep commitment to our mission and are ready to help save lives every day of the year.

You can help too. Find out how at [redcross.org](http://redcross.org).



**American Red Cross**  
Northwest Region

102104-02/16