

Nygren, Åse. "Tracing Trauma: The Narration of Suffering in Sherman Alexie's Fiction." Blekinge Institute of Technology, School of Technoculture, Humanities and Planning and Göteborg University, Department of English. January 2007.

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This dissertation examines the ways in which Sherman Alexie narrates suffering in his first four works of fiction: the short story collections *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) and *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000), and the novels *Reservation Blues* (1995) and *Indian Killer* (1996).

Despite the past decades' dramatic increase in American Indian literary production, the American Indian holocaust has remained unacknowledged, even denied. Chapter One draws attention to this silence surrounding the American Indian traumatic experience, contextualizes Alexie's fiction by weaving together the discussion of suffering and history, and ponders the question of how Alexie's "trauma fiction" fits into the literary landscape.

Chapter Two examines the two modes in which Alexie thematizes suffering in his fiction. The chapter traces the Freudian categories of mourning and melancholy and their critical expansions by Dominick LaCapra as structuring two different responses to historical loss and trauma. In exploring the characters' melancholic "acting out" of trauma as well as their attempts at "working through" trauma, the study argues that Alexie's fiction also draws attention to the inherent difficulties of representing suffering, particularly given the inarticulateness of the characters.

Besides linking characters to traumatic events of the past, Alexie links suffering to stereotyping, which is the focus of Chapter Three. The chapter explores how Alexie's characters portray what it is like to be reduced, infantilized, and pathologized as Others, and thus to live outside of an accessible identity.

While Alexie's stories are morally and ethically engaging, the same texts are often ironic, satiric, and full of humor. In Chapter Four, the study examines the ways in which Alexie's artistic vision mixes humor and suffering. The central question which informs this chapter is whether humor can be transformative and liberating, or whether the use of humor is simply another compulsive acting-out of trauma.

Alexie's narration of suffering, the study finally argues, may not only be said to invoke ethical responses from its readers but is also an ethical response in itself as it enacts a process of witnessing.

*Keywords:* Sherman Alexie, American Indian literature, trauma, suffering, mourning, melancholy, stereotyping, spectacles, humor, catharsis, witnessing, ethical turn