

*You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* by Sherman Alexie: A Review

Alexie opens this powerful, disturbing memoir by telling us about a New Year's party his alcoholic parents gave at their home on the Spokane Indian Reservation in the early 70s. The guests were extended family friends, tribal members. It was a noisy, exuberant party. Among the guests were two men known to be guilty of murder, one man who later would kill someone, and a guest who had earlier sexually abused Sherman Alexie. He describes how he maintained during the party a wary knowledge of where that man was. At the time Alexie was 6 to 8 years old.

The party introduces us to some aspects of the world of the Spokane Indian Reservation, with contradictory traits of joyous celebration, alcoholism, sexual and physical violence, close tribal ties. Later Alexie introduces us to the grinding poverty of the reservation. As if that were not enough, Sherman was born hydrocephalic, and thus underwent corrective surgery at age 2 months. He suffered seizures until he was seven years old. As an adolescent he had grossly disfiguring acne. He has perhaps not transcended but certainly triumphed over it all.

His greatest burden—and his greatest blessing—was, however, his mother. She was the greatest contradiction in his life. Alexie describes her as “brilliant, funny, beautiful, generous, vindictive, deceitful, tender, manipulative, abusive, loving, and intimidating.” Much of the memoir is devoted to Sherman's painful relationship with her. Alexie makes clear that this struggle continues.

The entire memoir interleaves expressive, poignant poems with prose narrative. A reader might well wonder how Alexie survived it all. During high school, he left the reservation to attend high school in a small town mostly white. Here his talents were recognized for the first time. He was a star basketball player and president of his class. His academic achievements earned him a scholarship to Gonzaga University, from which he transferred to Washington State University, dropping out just three units short of graduation.

*You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* powerfully reveals the excruciating circumstances in which Sherman Alexie lived and mysteriously thrived. To give just one example, Alexie's mother's bewildering emotional nature may be explained by the fact that she was both raped and product of a rape. So it should not be surprising that Alexie chooses to express his feelings and his life in strong language. Readers need to be prepared for Alexie's generous use of the f-bomb.

Alexie lives now in Seattle with his wife and two sons. Recently he cut short his book tour for this book—because he interpreted an appearance of his mother in a dream, telling him to do so.

Bob McDonnell