



Defending Walt Whitman

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“Defending Walt Whitman” provides Alexie with an opportunity to write about reservation basketball, one of his favorite topics, even as he responds to a nineteenth century icon of American poetry who was singularly responsible for breaking away from standard meter, rhyme, and subject matter. Alexie imagines that the bisexual Whitman would be quite charmed with the vision of sweaty, brown young men who are gallant in their own way yet who are initially defined as “twentieth-century warriors who will never kill.”

Alexie is aware of the primacy of basketball among Indian youth throughout the United States, and he is only one of a number of Indian writers who have noticed the phenomenon. Alexie seems unaware that Whitman died in the same year that basketball was invented by James Naismith (1892). Alexie is certainly aware of the powerful dynamic of combining the inclusive, poetic Whitman with the energies and angles of a game of basketball.

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