



## How to Write the Great American Indian Novel

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“How to Write the Great American Indian Novel” is one of Alexie's most notable and fully realized poems. It has enjoyed a second life as the poem that Seymour Polatkin reads in its entirety at a Seattle book store early in the screenplay and film of *The Business of Fancydancing* (2003). In two-line stanzas that build toward an inevitable but depressing conclusion, Alexie lists a series of supposed assumptions implicit in the title that are requisite in such a work: “The hero must be a half-breed, half white and half Indian, preferably/ from a horse culture. He should often weep alone. That is mandatory.” There is a connected cluster of cultural assumptions even in those two lines, but in the poem Alexie does not examine deeply each cultural presupposition. Instead, he heaps additional cultural presuppositions onto the ones just uttered: “If the hero is an Indian woman, she is beautiful. She must be slender/ and in love with a white man. But if she loves an Indian man/ then he must be a half-breed, preferably from a horse culture.”

Such absolute statements demand response and argument, but Alexie purposefully continues to state new stereotypes that are increasingly disturbing. Such large-swath stereotyping isolates images of Indians as artifacts from a past America, even as it allows Anglo-Americans to develop themselves as Indian wannabes with little real understanding of the patronized culture. Alexie's conclusion reveals that if all of these stereotypes are perpetuated in such a novel, “all of the white people will be Indians and all of the Indians will be ghosts.”

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