



## One Stick Song

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The dark humor, deep feeling, and supple style which have distinguished Sherman Alexie's novels and short stories about Native American experience in the United States are present in an especially forceful manner in *One Stick Song*, a collection of poems that function as a personal memoir that recollects and comments on his life as a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian in contemporary America. Capitalizing on the possibilities for a multiplicity of expressive modes that a collection of poems affords, Alexie offers both a singularly personal and dauntingly candid vision of Indian society while recalling close friends and members of his family whose lives augment and personify the patterns he identifies.

The poems in the book are bracketed by two extended autobiographical fragments, "The Unauthorized Biography of Me" which conveys the content of Alexie's mind and spirit through the tone of its idiosyncratic observations, and "Sugar Town," which is a lament for and tribute to his father, as well as a meditation on his own growth toward maturity. Within this flexible frame, Alexie effectively uses a wide range of poetic forms to establish a recognizable, singular voice: Essentially laconic, but capable of considerable passion; generally poised but sometimes very vulnerable; wary in anticipation of insults and rebuffs without closing contact with the world. Alexie often speaks with his own version of a contemporary American vernacular, characteristically in an expressionistic narrative called "The Warriors" which begins, "I hate baseball," and combines incidents from his youth with pointed, cogent cultural analysis. This mode is enlivened by sometimes startling moments of lyric fire, an introduction of the singing language that is at the core of the Native American oral tradition, which Alexie uses to create the emotional responses that mark his vivid depictions of humans in contact with each other, with the natural and with the supernatural or spirit world.

The title poem is a particularly powerful evocation of this tradition, a recollective story/song that works to reclaim centuries of loss by placing people in living memory. Its repetitive choral figures move toward a mood of revelation in which Alexie guides the reader to a view of a culture that is aslant from most popular conceptions, a new perspective on ancient ways that combats stereotypes while assembling an alternative identity that is compelling and persuasive in its vivid gathering of a life's imagery.

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