

### Book Review

Sherman, Alexie. (June 13, 2017). *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me*. Little Brown and Company (1 edition) (464 pages). ISBN-10: 031639677X

Sherman Alexie's *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* is a gripping memoir about love, loss, and the intergenerational pain of the Alexie family from the Wellpinit Reservation, located near Spokane-Coeur d'Alene, USA. In his 26<sup>th</sup> written work, Alexie blurs the line between fact and fiction in his witty and personal account of his childhood, move off the reservation, and the lasting impacts of a dysfunctional mother-son relationship.

Following the life of the author and his family, this work settles on a pinnacle year, 2015, in which Alexie lost his mother, Lillian, and underwent brain surgery. What started off as a simple memoir, quickly transformed into an ode to his late mother and a quest for understanding the complexities of grief. In this raw history of loss after loss after loss, Alexie asks, "Is there a cure for grief? Is there a cure for grief? Is there a cure for grief? Is there a cure for grief? Is there a cure for grief?" (p. 281).

To understand his love despite the addiction, mental illness, and neglect he experienced within his family and larger community, Alexie turned to the stories of his elders. Alexie recounted, "the Interior Salish, my people, had worshipped the wild salmon since our beginnings... My mother and father were members of the first generation of Interior Salish people who lived entirely without wild salmon. My mother and father, without wild salmon, were spiritual orphans" (p. 138). For Alexie and his family, themes of grief extended beyond the loss of loved ones, to the loss of belonging, loss of safety, loss of language, and the loss of the spiritual and cultural identity of a whole people.

For both Alexie and the reader, the understanding of intergenerational pain, social oppression, and at times overt racism, lends itself to a deep compassion and acknowledgement that healing can occur through grief.

While he may be described as an unreliable narrator, it is difficult to ascertain what parts of his narrative are accurate, and which parts are a fabrication to ease the reader, or perhaps even the author himself, through deeper grief and loss. As he has one of his sisters say, "You're always making up stuff from the past... And the stuff you imagine is always better than the stuff that actually happened" (p. 9).

Despite the themes of survival, loss and death, the memoir itself reads as surprisingly lighthearted and funny. As Alexie repeats, "humor is a crutch. Humor is a crutch. Humor is a crutch," and "be funny. Be funny. Be funny. Be funny" (p. 281). The emotional intensity is found instead in the poetry interspersed throughout, poetry which for the most part erupted in the year following Lillian's death and for Alexie, totaled more than 100 completed pieces.

*You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* is an engaging read which has the reader deeply identifying with the humanity of the author and yearning for the stories left untold. Written for the general public, this work is highly relevant given the current interest and emphasis in reconciliation across Canada. For many of us, we are only beginning to understand the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, which heard the voices of Indigenous people speaking to the pain and experiences of the loss of identity and cultural practices. Alexie provides readers with a first-hand look inside the experiences of a First Nation's family to compel one's own sense of compassion and understanding of the perpetuation of grief.

Novelist, poet and storyteller, Alexie has been the recipient of numerous awards, including a Mason Award, the Pen/Faulkner Award for Fiction, the PEN/Malamud Award for Short Fiction, a PEN/Hemingway Citation for Best First Fiction, to name a few. His well-known work, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007) won the National Book Award for Young People's Literature. Alexie presently lives with in Spokane with his wife Diane and their two sons.

**Rebecca Stares**  
University of Calgary