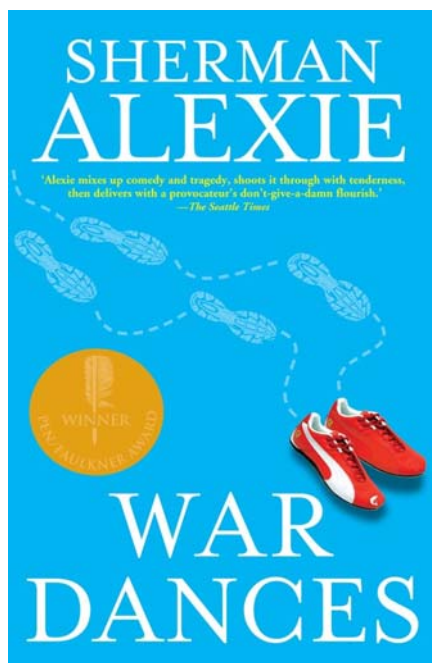


War Dances



War Dances
Sherman Alexie
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Sherman Alexie is a native American and many of his stories and poems in this collection make this obvious. Other pieces ignore it completely. He sometimes refers to himself as a “part-time Indian”. He treats his ancestry with humour and lightness, while also exposing the mistreatment of natives by others and the pain this brings.

This is an unusual collection, containing poems, short stories and other work which could be creative nonfiction of an autobiographical nature or pure fiction, but not written in a short story form. The book is full of surprises.

The title story is very unconventional in its structure: divided into sixteen sections, some of them ‘normal’ prose, some in the form of lists, one verse, a number of ‘interviews’. The author is not bound in any way to tradition. It is a long

piece and purportedly deals with a brain tumour and his handling of the situation. This is interspersed with material about his father and their relationship, family history and existential questions – the work starts with the dilemma of a cockroach, à la Kafka.

The title of the book, and of this ‘story’, seems to refer to life as a series of battles which are to be danced around, or through. The battle of the tumour is one of these and it is unclear whether the tumour is what it appears to be – nevertheless, the battle is real.

In ‘Breaking and Entering’ the author examines issues of race, skin colour, ethnicity and one’s place in the world, with the author again wearing his Indian skin.

‘Fearful Symmetry’ is written in the third person and again features an Indian protagonist, but is not so much about race or ethnic issues as about life in general. It is finely observed and written.

‘The Ballad of Paul Nonetheless’ and ‘The Senator’s Son’ seem to owe nothing to the author’s Indian heritage. Both are observations of how men deal with situations of loneliness (Paul) and integrity (or lack of it) (the Senator and his son).

Alexie’s writing is very male-centric with no attempt to portray women other than from this perspective. This is not a criticism – it is a legitimate approach. However, it does give the collection a lop-sidedness.

The prose pieces are interspersed with verse and sometimes contain verse. These all demonstrate Alexie’s versatility. He gets away with styles that would probably not work in lesser hands. There are some references very much embedded in North American culture, the meaning of which was lost on me but, that aside, the subjects of this collection and the issues explored are relevant to readers everywhere.

Sherman Alexie’s work has a maturity to it in its dealing with American Aboriginal issues that we rarely see in writing by Australian Aborigines. There is a self-consciousness and often anger in the Australian writing that is absent from Alexie’s and many other North American ‘native’ writers. One notable exception in Australia is Bruce Pascoe, whose work is full of humour as it deals with deeper issues of race, prejudice and disadvantage – see, for instance, *Bloke* – while not ignoring those issues which beset humanity generally. Alexie, likewise, sees the personal in a much wider context and, thus, speaks to all of us.

War Dances is a wonderful collection of writing from a master storyteller. On a second reading it continued to evoke new insights and fresh laughter.