Lesson Plans and Resources for *War Dances*

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These resources are all available, both separately and together, at www.freelibrary.org/onebook

Please send any comments or feedback about these resources to Larissa.Pahomov@gmail.com.
ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

The materials in this unit plan are meant to be flexible and easy to adapt to your own classroom. Each chapter has discussion questions provided in a later section. However, for students reading the entire book, there are several themes that connect the stories. Students should be introduced to the following key questions as they begin reading, and keep them in mind as they work through the book:

   How should humans respond to injustice, especially those injustices in the world that can no longer be righted?

   Many of the pieces in the book involve sentimental remembrances of the past, but at one point nostalgia is referred to as a "false idol" (37). What role does nostalgia play in our lives? Is it a helpful or harmful force in the world?

   Many of the pieces also feature characters who identify the limitations of their identity or background, but are incapable of shedding this part of themselves. How can our identities limit us? Are people capable of breaking free of their background and traditions if they choose to?

Many of the reader response questions and suggested projects relate to these essential questions. Students are encouraged to ask these questions not only of the characters of the book, but of themselves.
IN-CLASS INTRODUCTION

This lesson is designed to provide students with a one-class introduction to the book. The lesson can be used to start off a class reading of the text, or to encourage them to read it independently.

As a recipient of One Book resources, the Free Library requires that you devote one class period to introducing War Dances to students, either using this lesson or your own plan.

1. Hand out books. Have students look at the picture of the author and examine the back cover while you read the excerpt of the authors' biography:

Sherman J. Alexie, Jr., was born in October 1966. A Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, he grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, WA, about 50 miles northwest of Spokane, WA.

Born hydrocephalic, which means with water on the brain, Alexie underwent a brain operation at the age of 6 months and was not expected to survive. When he did beat the odds, doctors predicted he would live with severe mental retardation. Though he showed no signs of this, he suffered severe side effects, such as seizures, throughout his childhood. In spite of all he had to overcome, Alexie learned to read by age three, and devoured novels, such as John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath, by age five. All these things ostracized him from his peers, though, and he was often the brunt of other kids' jokes on the reservation.

As a teenager, after finding his mother's name written in a textbook assigned to him at the Wellpinit school, Alexie made a conscious decision to attend high school off the reservation in Reardan, WA, about 20 miles south of Wellpinit, where he knew he would get a better education. At Reardan High he was the only Indian, except for the school mascot. There he excelled academically and became a star player on the basketball team. This experienced inspired his first young adult novel, The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian.

In 1985 Alexie graduated Reardan High and went on to attend Gonzaga University in Spokane, WA, on scholarship. After two years at Gonzaga, he transferred to Washington State University (WSU) in Pullman, WA.

Alexie planned to be a doctor and enrolled in pre-med courses at WSU, but after fainting numerous times in human anatomy class realized he needed to change his career path. That change was fueled when he stumbled into a poetry workshop at WSU.

Encouraged by poetry teacher Alex Kuo, Alexie excelled at writing and realized he'd found his new path. Since starting out as a writer, Alexie has published over a dozen books of both poetry and prose, and has received several national awards and honors, including the National Book Award and the Pen/Faulkner Award.

2. Hand out or project the Map of Early Indian Tribes, West. Have students identify "Spokane" and "Coeur D'Alenne" on the map.

3. Next, Hand out or project the Census Map of Indian Reservations, 2000. Have students use the key to find the Spokane and Coeur D'Alenne reservations.

5. Discuss: How do they think Alexie's personal history might have influenced the poem, and what the underlying message is? (What is the underlying message?)

6. Introduce students to any combination of secondary information designed to educate them about the history and current issues surrounding American Indian tribes, both in the Pacific Northwest and Nationally:

- Abbreviated Timeline of Indian history from 1789 to present (print)

- Spokane Tribe website (online)

- PBS website for the Ken Burns documentary "The West" (online)
  http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/

These resources could also be assigned as exploratory homework, with students recording and reporting back relevant information that they discover.
MAP OF EARLY INDIAN TRIBES, WEST
DETAIL OF MAP OF EARLY INDIAN TRIBES, WEST
ABBREVIATED HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF INDIAN HISTORY
Adapted from: http://facstaff.uww.edu/guliga/uwec/american_indian_history_timeline.htm

1990 Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (Public Law 101-601), United States, requires museums and federal agencies to return human remains, funerary and sacred objects and objects of cultural patrimony to tribes that can show they had belonged to the tribe and had been removed without the tribe's consent. Trafficking in human remains is prohibited.

1987 Congress passes the Indian Gaming Act limiting tribes to gaming ventures allowed by states.

1978 Indian Child Welfare Act, United States, protecting Indian tribes' interest in retaining custody of their children.

1975 Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, establishing policy to permit greater governmental and administrative powers to Indian tribes.

1968 American Indian Movement founded in Minneapolis

1960 Canada grants citizenship to Indians.

1949-1960 Relocation. The Bureau of Indian Affairs relocated some 35,000 Indians from reservations to cities.

1934 Wheeler-Howard (Indian Reorganization) Act, permitted tribes to organize and write constitutions for self-government, and directed the government to consolidate and conserve Indian lands, and encouraged education and economic plans for Indians; the Johnson-O'Malley Act authorized contracts with states to administer educational, medical, and welfare programs on Indian reservations. In 1974, the Johnson-O'Malley Act was amended to encourage Indian direction of such programs.

1924 United States Indians given citizenship, although right to vote denied by several states; Utah the last to enfranchise Indians, in 1960, in state elections.

1906 United States Antiquities Act establishes national jurisdiction over antiquities.

1903 Lone Wolf v. Hitchcock, the Supreme Court ruled that Lone Wolf, a Kiowa, could not obstruct the implementation of allotment on Kiowa land, regardless of Kiowa consent: the case established Congress' power to unilaterally break treaties. The Court declared the Indians to be "an ignorant and dependent race" that must be governed by the "Christian people" of the United States.

1902 Cherokee Nation v. Hitchcock, the Supreme Court held the United States has the power to overrule Cherokee laws.

1890 Ghost Dance Movement led by the Paiute prophet Wovoka gains influence among western Indians. At Wounded Knee, United States troops massacre 300+ Sioux Indians en route to a Ghost Dance celebration.

1887 Dawes Allotment Act, authorizes the break-up of Indian reservations into individual allotments usually of 160 acres, and the sale of "surplus" lands remaining after enrolled tribal members had received allotments (no provision for later generations)

1884 Congress acknowledges the rights of Eskimos to Alaskan territorial lands.
1881 Sitting Bull and his band of 187 surrender to officials at Fort Buford, North Dakota.

1879 Richard Pratt founds the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, with the philosophy of assimilating Indians into white culture.

1879-85 Many "Friends of the Indian" organizations are founded, including Indian Protection Committee, Indian Rights Association, Women's National Indian Association, and National Indian Defense Association.

1877 Flight of the Nez Perce under Chief Joseph in the Northwest.

1876-77 Sioux War for the Black Hills, involving the Sioux, Cheyennes, and Arapahos, under Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse. In 1876, the Battle of Little Bighorn.

1871 Gold discovered in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Treaties protecting Indian lands ignored by miners.

1869-70 Smallpox epidemic among Canadian Plains Indian including Blackfeet, Piegan, and Bloods.

1868 Indians are denied the right to vote as a result of the 14th Amendment.

1867 "Peace Commission" makes a survey of Indian affairs and recommends that the current treaty process be abandoned. This commission and the Nez Perce Indians negotiate the last of 370 treaties between the federal government and tribes.

1862-63 Santee Sioux stage an uprising in Minnesota under Chief Little Crow. In 1863-64, it spreads to North Dakota and involves the Teton Sioux as well. Thirty-eight Indians are sentenced and hanged.

1853-56 United States acquires 174 million acres of Indian lands through 52 treaties, all of which are subsequently broken by whites.

1844 The first issues of the Cherokee Advocate are published in Oklahoma. Federal soldiers confiscate the press.

1835 Texas declares itself a republic independent from Mexico. The Texas Rangers are organized to campaign against the Comanches.

1834 Congress reorganizes the Indian offices, creating the U.S. Department of Indian Affairs (still within the War Department). The Trade and Intercourse Act redefines the Indian Territory and Permanent Indian Frontier, and gives the army the right to quarantine Indians.

1831 Cherokee Nation v. Georgia, Chief Justice John Marshall ruled that the Indians form "domestic dependent nations" over which the United States is guardian, as over wards.

1830 Indian Removal Act narrowly passes Congress, calling for relocation of eastern Indians to an Indian territory west of the Mississippi River. Cherokees contest it in court, and in 1832, the Supreme Court decides in their favor, but Andrew Jackson ignores the decision. From 1831-39, the Five Civilized tribes of the Southeast are relocated to the Indian Territory. The Cherokee "Trail of Tears" takes place in 1838-39.

1789 U.S. Constitution, several clauses relate the importance and place of American Indians in the new republic.
ONE BOOK, ONE PHILADELPHIA
GRAPHIC ARTS CONTEST

In this year’s One Book, One Philadelphia selection, The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, Sherman Alexie tells the story of how Junior’s relationship with his coach helps him overcome some of the difficulties he faced in to school in an environment that was completely different from his home life. In this year’s student contest, we invite students to submit a comic panel telling a story about a teacher who made a positive difference in their life.

Eligibility
• This contest is open to students in grades six through twelve who attend a Philadelphia public or charter school and who have read either of the One Book, One Philadelphia selections, War Dances or The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian.
• All entries should include the name of the student, their home address, telephone number, school name, and teacher name.

Deadline Date
• Submit your entry to Vera Da Vinci, Office of Secondary School Reform, Education Center – 2nd floor, 440 North Broad Street, 19130 by February 25, 2011. Winners will be announced by March 5, 2011.

Artwork
• Students may create their artwork utilizing a software program such as Comic Life, Illustrator, or In Design, or may create their panel without the use of a computerized program.
• For students using traditional art materials, any 2 dimensional medium may be employed; e.g. colored pencils, oil pastels, pen and ink, water color, tempera, mixed media
• Entries may not be larger than 22” x 28”.
• Entries will be judged for originality and effective response to the prompt.

Awards for Participation
• All participants in the graphic arts contest will receive a copy of Trickster: Native American Tales: A Graphic Collection

• There will be four winners, each of whom will win a gift certificate. In addition, they will have their work displayed at the Free Library of Philadelphia on March 16, 2011.

  Fourth Place Winner - $25 gift certificate
  Third Place Winner - $50 gift certificate
  Second Place Winner - $75 gift certificate
  First Place Winner - $100 gift certificate

• The student who wins first prize will also be invited (along with their guardian and their teacher) to the One Book, One Philadelphia closing dinner with author Sherman Alexie on Wednesday, March 16, 2011.
LESSON PLAN SUGGESTIONS

If you would like to focus on one particular essential question, below are lists of pieces from the book grouped (roughly) by theme. Literary Logs and possible assessments are also recommended.

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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Relevant Chapters</th>
<th>Logs + Assessments</th>
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<tr>
<td>Injustice</td>
<td>The Limited, Breaking and Entering, War Dances, Catechism, The Senator's Son, Another Proclamation, Home of the Braves, Looking Glass, Roman Catholic Haiku</td>
<td>Analytical Assessment #2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nostalgia</td>
<td>Go, Ghost, Go, After Building the Ultimate Star Wars Death Star, War Dances, The Theology of Reptiles, Ode to Small-Town Sweethearts, Invisible Dog on a Leash, Big Bang Theory, Invisible Dog on a Leash, Salt</td>
<td>&quot;Remembrances&quot; Literary Log Creative Assessment #1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Breaking and Entering, Go, Ghost, Go, War Dances, Catechism, The Senator's Son, The Ballad of Paul Nonetheless, Fearful Symmetry, Salt</td>
<td>“Native Identity” Literary Log Creative Assessment #2</td>
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READER RESPONSE QUESTIONS

"The Limited"
In the last line, the narrator proclaims "the only life I can save is my own" (2). Do you think that writing--and sharing--the poem helps save his life? Why, and how?

Breaking and Entering
In the middle of the story, the narrator asks the reader: "Nothing is ever that clear, is it? I was legally innocent, that much is true, but was I morally innocent?" (12) How would you answer this question?

Why does the author call up the TV station to correct them about his identity? Why does he recognize that this is a terrible idea only later, after it's over?

Go, Ghost, Go
The Ghost Dance was a religious belief and practice that, among other things, stated that performing the Ghost Dance properly would lead to peace and freedom for all American Indian tribes.

The narrator describes the professor he meets as "addicted to the indigenous." How can one be addicted to an idea? How does the professor "consume" what needs to in order to become addicted?

Bird-Watching at Night
This text has two clear voices present. Can you describe the differences between them? What kind of relationship do you think the two voices have with each other?

After Building the Lego Star Wars Ultimate Death Star
What message is the father trying to share with his sons? Do you think it matters that they play with lego kits instead of rocks and snow? Will their experience be the same as his, or not?

War Dances
How would you describe the narrator's attitudes towards tradition? Do you think he finds his tribe's traditions valuable?

How does the section titled "exit interview" impart information to the reader, even though we only see the potential questions for the interview?

In the section titled "Mutually Assured Destruction," why do you think the narrator wrote a poem altering the truth about his father, and then described all of the differences between the poem at the "true" story?

At the end of the story, has the narrator won or gained anything?
Theology of Reptiles
How would you describe the "theology" of a reptile? Do you think that the title is meant to be serious or satirical? Why?

Catechism
Why do you think the narrator doesn't directly answer many of the questions posed in this text? Does this indirect style show any particular attitude or emotion?

What do you think the narrator thinks and believes about God?

Ode to Small-town Sweethearts
The narrator describes the house as being full of "survivors and sinners." Do either of these labels apply to the narrator? Why or why not?

The Senator's Son
The narrator of the story proclaims about his childhood that "it had never occurred to me to be something different" (81). What sort of "different" things is he thinking of? In what ways do you choose to be "different" from what surrounds you -- and what ways do you choose not to, or maybe haven't even thought of?

Why does the narrator react to Jeremy's confession of being gay the way that he does? Why does he focus on Jeremy being a "liar"?

Why does Jeremy choose to stay quiet about the attack? Do you think he makes the right choice?

The narrator's father has "one basic principle: an unpredictable world demands a predictable moral code" (93). What is this code? Is everybody in the story following the same one? And do you think that this code helps society or hurts it?

Another Proclamation
In this poem, Alexie references the mass execution at the end of the Dakota War in 1862, where Lincoln approved the execution of 38 Sioux. Do these facts change your opinion of Abraham Lincoln?

Why does the narrator end the poem with a question? What is your answer to that question?

Invisible Dog on a Leash
Why does the broken invisible dog leash make the narrator cry? What happens to us when our childhood beliefs are revealed as fantasy?

Home of the Braves
What does the title of this poem reference? How do patriotism, professional sports, or casual misappropriation potentially relate to the theme of the poem?

The Ballad of Paul Nonetheless
In the middle of the story, Paul declares that he is "pleased with his progress and place in life" (137). That same night he thinks, "I'm wasting my life" (139). Which one do you believe? Can they both be
true?

Can you sympathize with Paul and his problems?

**On Airplanes**
"How dare you!" "How imperia! How colonial!" (151). In what way does the narrator take the request to switch seats personally? Do you think he is being serious or joking? Why?

**Big Bang Theory**
How do the two narratives in this story interact with each other -- or don't interact?

Does the story describe the creation or beginning of something? If so, what?

**Ode for Pay Phones**
Have you ever used a pay phone? In what ways is the experience different than using a cell phone?

Why does the narrator think so fondly of what sounds like a pretty negative experience?

**Fearful Symmetry**
This story is one of several where the main character, Sherwin Polatkin, shares autobiographical details with the author. Alexie has also had his ups and downs with the movie industry; he has made two feature-length films, but talks to turn his book "Indian Killer" into a movie never lead to a final product. In this story, Polatkin shares his last name with a character from "Indian Killer."

If Alexie is using this story to make a statement about the movie industry, what do you think he is saying?

What is contradictory about the idea of a "safety fire?" Why does it work, and what could it symbolized?

At the end of the story, Polatkin thinks: "I am a lying genius... and what is lying but a form of storytelling?" Do you agree with this statement? Do you think that Polatkin will find his creative energy again because of his revelation?

**Ode to Mix Tapes**
Why does the narrator describe making a mix tape as "blue-collar work"? Why do they describe the old process so fondly?

**Roman Catholic Haiku**
This text does not follow the traditional Haiku format. Why do think it was still named "Haiku?"

Why divide the text into three sections? What do these three shorter scenes achieve that one continuous scene could not -- especially with the one-word titles for each scene?

**Looking Glass**
More information can be found about Chief Joseph here: [http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/a_c/chiefjoseph.htm](http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/a_c/chiefjoseph.htm)
The title of the text, "Looking Glass," was also the name of a Nez Perce Indian who lead alongside of Chief Joseph:  
http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/i_r/looking.htm

What is a Looking Glass, and why make this person's name the title of the piece?

Why does the narrator refer to his grandmother's hair as "epic?" Can her hair compare to the epic events that Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce tribe have endured?

**Salt**
"Indians respect dead bodies even more than the live ones" (195). How do you think this statement influences the narrator's beliefs about death, and about having to write newspaper obituaries?

Why is the narrator so personally affected by old lady's stories about her dying husband and cat? Why does he state at the end: "I don't want to live forever?"

**Food Chain**
This poem immediately follows a story about a young man coming to terms with the idea of death, and is also the last piece in the book. Why end with this poem?

How is the narrator connecting with the food chain in his instructions?

Go back to the first text in the book, "The Limited." The narrator in that poem said, "the only life I can save is my own" (2). Do you think that the narrator in "Food Chain" has the same belief? Has he succeeded in saving his life by the end of the book?
Vocabulary

**Voluminous (6)** - Written, directed, and shot by amateurs, the footage was both incomplete and *voluminous*.

**Paternalistic (7)** - Was I being *paternalistic*, condescending, and hypocritical?

**Exonerate (13)** - Shortly after the police held the press conference that *exonerated* me, Elder’s family... organized a protest.

**Indigenous (15)** - My fellow liberals spoke of my lateral violence and the destructive influence of colonialism on the *indigenous*...

**Chicano (22)** - You should write a screenplay about this shit -- About some fictional city, Grown fat and pale and pretty, That's destroyed by a *Chicano* apocalypse.

**Existential (29)** - As he died, did he feel fear? Isolation? *Existential* dread?

**Metamorphosis (31)** - I would free the poor thing, and she'd unfurl and pat dry her tiny wings, then fly to my lips and give me a sweet kiss for sheltering her *metamorphosis*.

**Theology (65)** - The *Theology* of Reptiles (title)

**Molt (65)** - We found a snake, dead in *midmolt*.

**Catechism (67)** - Catechism (title)

**Slipstream (73)** - Now you will survive if you ride / In his slipstream.

**Pro Bono (78)** - So my friends and I had feasted in celebration of my new junior partnership in the law firm of Robber Baron, Tax Dodger and Guilt-ridden *Pro Bono*.

**Pernicious (89)** - The Republican Party has, for decades, silently ignored the *pernicious* effects of racial segregation, while simultaneously resisting any public or private efforts at integration.

**Cacophony (106)** - Can you imagine the *cacophony* of thirty-eight different death songs?

**Felonious (109)** - I was an emotional kid, so I started to cry, and the felonious dude said, "Shit, kid, take it, I found it in the garbage anyway."

**Orate (117)** - He wanted to *orate* it with all the profundity and passion of a Shakespearean couplet, but that seemed to eccentric and desperate and--well, literate.
**Profundity (117)** - He wanted to orate it with all the **profundity** and passion of a Shakespearean couplet, but that seemed to eccentric and desperate and--well, literate.

**Callow (119)** - Maybe he was an utterly contemporory and **callow** human being.

**Unhinged (121)** - Thus **unhinged** and aroused, Paul turned around and ran against the moving sidewalk.

**Delirious (125)** - **Delirious**, Paul watched her leave.

**Subterranean (128)** - Ah, Paul thought, who cares about the color of a man's skin when his true identity is much deeper--**subterranean**--and far more diverse and disturbing than the ethnicity of his mother and father.

**Metaphysical (154)** - But wait, before I get too critical or **metaphysical**, let me return to that YWCA on Maple Street in Spokane, Washington.

**Inconsequential (157)** - You dated a series of **inconsequential** boys.

**Taciturn (162)** - On August 11, 1948, sixteen smoke jumpers, led by a **taciturn** man named Wayne Ford, parachuted into Sirois Canyon, a remote area near Wenatchee, Washington, to fight a small wildfire.

**Mortified (186)** **Mortified**, she looked at me and said, "I'm sorry."

**Pragmatic (193)** A **pragmatic** and lonely women, sure.

**Blasphemy (196)** I wasn't a Christian and didn't know much about the definition of **blasphemy**, but it seemed like he'd committed some kind of sin.
Literary Log – Remembrances

Name: ___________________________

Each time a memory is brought up—in any form, or any text in the book—record a summary of that memory. Then write a brief description of the *purpose* of the memory for the narrator—what does it mean to them, and why share it when they do? Include the page number for later reference.

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Each time the identity of the author is discussed, OR an event from American Indian history is shared, write a brief description of the moment in the book, and then analyze the author's reason for including that moment. What effect does it have on the reader's understanding of that chapter?

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<th>Effect on the reader’s understanding</th>
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SUGGESTED ANALYTICAL ASSESSMENTS

1. Read the review of "War Dances" from the San Francisco Chronicle (included in Print Resources). Respond to the review: Do you agree or disagree with their statements?

2. Read the excerpt from Sherman Alexie's interview with the publication "Modern American Poetry" (included in Print Resources). Write a response: In what ways do his statements about writing and his style appear in War Dances? Choose one (or more) specific statements that he made, and show how this idea or issue appeared in the book.

3. When War Dances won the prestigious PEN/Faulkner award, the commentary provided by Al Young for the PEN organization stated:

   "The honored book, War Dances, is a collection of structurally inventive pieces on the themes of love, betrayal, familial relationships, race, and class. The stories are interspersed with poems which refract their themes or topics. About this collection judge Al Young says, “War Dances taps every vein and nerve, every tissue, every issue that quickens the current blood-pulse: parenthood, divorce, broken links, sex, gender and racial conflict, substance abuse, medical neglect, 9/11, Official Narrative vs. What Really Happened, settler religion vs. native spirituality; marketing, shopping, and war, war, war. All the heartbreaking ways we don’t live now—this is the caring, eye-opening beauty of this rollicking, bittersweet gem of a book.”

Choose one of the many themes listed in the quote from Al Young, and underlying message about this theme? Support your thesis with ample support from the text."
SUGGESTED CREATIVE ASSESSMENTS

1. **Write your own piece of nostalgia:** identify a memory from your past -- ideally one that is bittersweet, and long gone -- and write a creative piece reflecting on that experience and how it relates to your life now. Like Alexie, you have the freedom to blur the lines between poetry, prose, and autobiography!

2. **For classrooms with online access:** visit the University of Washington's digital collection, "American Indians of the Pacific Northwest." Browse the online collection of documents. If looking through 1500+ scanned documents, consider narrowing it down to a search for "Spokane:"


   On your own or with a partner, use this document to create a "found poem" -- you must create an original work pulling only from words in the document. The words may be rearranged and repeated as you please. (If students are lost for a how to begin, invite them to focus on one of the central themes of "War Dances" -- Injustice, Nostalgia, or Identity.)

3. **Revealing Interview:** Write a short story in the style of "Exit Interview for my Father" in the story "War Dances." Choose someone that has left you leaving a lot of questions in life--it might not be someone you know personally, but it should be someone you know a lot about. Reveal your relationship (and maybe also your issues) with them by asking them detailed questions... just remember, they're never going to answer them!
ONLINE RESOURCES

Sherman Alexie's Official Website
www.fallsapart.org
Biography, links to interviews and excerpts, and other information about Alexie’s work.

Web English Teacher: Sherman Alexie
http://www.webenglishteacher.com/alexie.html
A collection of online links and resources, including some lesson plans.

"Morning Edition" Interview:
http://www.npr.org/templates/player/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=1397737&m=1399931

Colbert Report Interview:

Collection of Historical Maps: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/histus.html
Native Tribes, East: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/united_states/early_indian_east.jpg
Native Tribes, West: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/united_states/early_indian_west.jpg

Digital Collections @ The University of Washington: American Indians of the Pacific Northwest
http://content.lib.washington.edu/aipnw/index.html
An enormous collection of primary source documents and photographs, including thousands relating directly to the Spokane tribe.

Spokane Tribe Website:
A small and informative website about the current location and situation of the Spokane.

Extended Timeline of American Indian History:
http://facstaff.uww.edu/guliga/uwec/american_indian_history_timeline.htm
A longer, more comprehensive version of the timeline provided with the introductory lesson.
Sherman Alexie’s short story "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" (which appeared originally in the New Yorker in 2003, and was later published in the collection "Ten Little Indians" that same year) is a mighty high standard for any contemporary American writer to match. The fusion of emotion and image, sympathy and grace, the fluidity and power of its language, make it for me one of the finest short stories of the decade. The way it depicts contemporary American Indian life on the streets of Seattle, and in the hearts of Americans - hard to beat!

So I began turning pages of Alexie's new collection with great expectations. He's one of the few writers of his generation who might meet, or possibly even exceed, his own mark. Alas, in "War Dances," he doesn't even come close. Of course, it's a bit unfair to make this kind of comparison, especially in a collection as interesting overall as this one. Look what we have here, 200 pages of smart modern stories interspersed with witty and deep-feeling verse.

You can almost feel Alexie reaching out to us, and to his muse, saying, Look, I don't just write lyric and beautiful stories about people like myself - I can write smart, lean and fast-moving tales about (mostly) men in modern life, whatever tribe they grew up in.

Take the main character of the first story, "Breaking and Entering," a man who discovers certain truths and uncertainties in a murderous encounter with a young black kid from his neighborhood. He's a middle-class American Indian, rather than one of the whiskey-soaked inhabitants of the Seattle tenderloin, as is the protagonist of that beautiful New Yorker story.

So is the main character of the title tale, who breaks the form of the short story in order to make clear his relationship with his ailing father, and with his own ailing body and soul. The senator's son in the story of the same name fights a battle with his own overbearing father and his own macho self, nearly ruining his life in the process.

The main character in "The Ballad of Paul Nonetheless," a story in which Alexie strays farthest from the core of his usual material, chases beautiful women at the cost of his marriage and ultimately of his own serenity. The screenwriter in "Fearful Symmetry" and the young obituary writer in "Salt" depict other subtle characteristics of men in ascent and decline.

The poems that alternate with these stories at first seem gratuitous. But on rereading I found that they played off nicely against the stories, on the questions of love and family, ego and collective life. And now and then they overreach the intensity of the stories, as in the forceful rendering of the story of Abraham Lincoln's signing of an order to hang 38 Sioux in Mankato, Minn., in 1862, making possible, as Alexie points out, the largest public execution in U.S. history.

"But before they died," the poem has it, these more than three dozen Indians "sang their death songs. Can you imagine the cacophony of thirty-eight different death songs? ... But wait, one Indian was pardoned at the last minute, so only thirty-seven Indians had to sing their death songs. But, O, O, O, O, can you imagine the cacophony of that one survivor's mourning song?"

When you read this new collection, however much it might suffer in comparison with Alexie's finest work, you can certainly still hear traces of that one survivor's song, a chant certainly well worth listening to.

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Iowa Review Interview (Excerpt):
http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/alexie/fraser.htm

EXEMPLARY STARTS HERE

JF: You've done that, and written from a white person's view, too.
SA: Well, I know a lot more about being white—because I have to, I live in the white world. A white person
doesn't live in the Indian world. I have to be white every day.
JF: What about your female characters?
SA: I'm not a woman. (Laughs). Never was. I think often my characters, outside of Spokane Indian guys, are
often a little bit thin because I have a difficult time getting into them and getting to know them. My
white people often end up being sort of "cardboardy"—which is thematically all right—but it isn't necessarily my original
purpose. I just get uncomfortable writing about them.
JF: Really. Is that something you're trying to develop and work on?
SA: Yeah, I'm trying to become a better writer. I think in the end I'll get closer to that. And about women's
experience—I'm better than most male writers. They see the Madonna-whore—it's incredible: these
progressive, liberal intelligent, highly-educated men are writing complex, diverse, wonderful male characters in
the same book where the female characters are like women in a 3 a.m. movie on Showtime.
JF: You've said having come from a matriarchal culture gives you more insight.
SA: I think it helps. And I give my stuff to the women around me. 'Does this work?' I spend my whole life around
women—I should know something. If I don't know it, I ask. It has to be a conscious effort. It's too easy to fall
back on stereotypes and myths, and I think that's what most writers
when they write about women.
JF: So you're conscious of it.
SA: I'm conscious of the fact that I mythologize. (Laughs). I'm still a caveman. I just like to think of myself as a
sensitive caveman.
JF: Going back to your growth as a writer, as you develop and gain facility—you're getting better technically, for
example—do you fear that you'll lose some of that tension that comes from being a struggling new writer?
SA: My friend Donna, who helps me edit, we talk about this. When I first started, my grammar was atrocious,
but she said that often people don't care when so-called "unprivileged people's" grammar is atrocious because
it's part of the "voice." And they account for it in that way.
JF: In fact readers might think it's "appropriate."
SA: When in fact it's just bad grammar. It's the result of a poor education. But I'm better now. Most of my
sentence fragments now are intentional. (Laughs).
JF: What did your parents expect you to be?
SA: Oh God. Alive. In their fondest hopes. I'm the first member of my family—that's extended—who's graduated from college. No one else has since. I was a very bright kid; I was a little prodigy in all sorts of ways. There were friends and family telling me I was going to be a doctor or a lawyer. Nobody predicted I would be doing this, including me.

JF: So you didn't have a sense of yourself as a writer until college?
SA: Right. I wrote and I loved reading, and brown guys—you're supposed to be Jesus, saving the world with law or medicine.

JF: And with writing can you save the world?
SA: You can do more than a doctor or a lawyer can. If I were a doctor nobody would be inviting me to talk to reservations. I'd be a different person. Writers can influence more people.

JF: Can poetry change the direction of society?
SA: I don't know. A lot of people are reading my poems and other people's poems because of me. This 55-year-old white guy at a reading said, 'I never got poems, I hated them, and then I read your book and liked them, and now I'm reading all sorts of poems.' And that's great. If I can be a doorway . . .

SA: You throw in a couple of birds and four directions and corn pollen and it's Native American literature, when it has nothing to do with the day-to-day lives of Indians. I want my literature to concern the daily lives of Indians. I think most Native American literature is so obsessed with nature that I don't think it has any useful purpose. It has more to do with the lyric tradition of European Americans than it does with indigenous cultures. So when an Indian writes a poem about a tree, I think: 'It's already been done!' And those white guys are going to do it better than you. Nobody can write about a tree like a white guy.

JF: Now why is that?
SA: I don't know. They've been doing it longer.

JF: I'd like to see what you'd write about a tree.
SA: I'm not even interested! I'm interested in people. I think most native literature is concerned with place because they tell us to be. That's the myth. I think it's detrimental. I think most Native American literature is unreadable by the vast majority of Native Americans.

JF: Along those lines, I'm wondering about a seeming paradox. You often say during readings and talks that you want to honor your culture's privacy, and yet your work is so public. It seems like you protect it and expose it at the same time. There's a tension created.

SA: Yes— you've seen me read: it's funny. There's always been a stand-up element. Now I'm doing real stand-up, and it's amazing the freedom I got when I called it stand-up. I talked about things I would never talk about in a literary world. I can do anything I want, and I get the same amount of laughter when I do stand-up. What I hope to do is bring literary humor to my comedy fans instead of more dick jokes (although I tell my share of dick jokes)—and I want to bring more comedy to the poetry fans.

JF: Is there anyone else doing that?
SA: I don't know. A really good stand-up comic is a poet; it's about the use of language. It can be really poetic. And I like politically conscious comedy.

JF: Along those lines, I'm wondering about a seeming paradox. You often say during readings and talks that you want to honor your culture's privacy, and yet your work is so public. It seems like you protect it and expose it at the same time. There's a tension created.

SA: Yes, of course there is. One of the ways I've dealt with it is that I don't write about anything sacred. I don't write about any ceremonies; I don't use any Indian songs.

JF: True. You mention sweat lodges but only obliquely. I'm thinking of the image of the old woman in the poem who emerges from the sweat lodge.

SA: Yes, I'm outside the sweat lodge. In Reservation Blues I'm in it and I realized I didn't like it. I approach my writing the same way I approach my life. It's what I've been taught and how I behave with regard to my spirituality.

JF: How do you draw the line as to what is off limits?
SA: My tribe drew that line for me a long time ago. It's not written down, but I know it. If you're Catholic you wouldn't tell anybody about the confessional. I feel a heavy personal responsibility, and I accept it, and I honor
it. It's part of the beauty of my culture. I've been called fascist a couple of times, at panels. I've censored myself. I've written things that I have since known to be wrong.

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JF: One of the things you said is that poetry equals anger and imagination. Do you feel like a lot of the power of your earlier work came from being a younger man full of passion and anger, and do you ever worry about that lessening as you get older and things get easier for you? That is, are you still angry, and has it changed if you are?

SA: I could respond to that in two ways: the richest black man in the country still has a hard time getting a taxi in New York at midnight. But for me, personal success or personal privilege—I have a tremendous amount of it now—I mean I have my own damned office. How many writers have that? Just to manage my life I had to hire somebody. And I'm rich. Not by Steve Forbes standards, but by Indian standards I'm the Indian Steve Forbes. I bought a TV last night because I wanted one for the office.

JF: Are you still amazed by that?

SA: Oh yeah. I just laugh. When I had no money, and a great book came out, I couldn't get it. I had to wait. I love the idea that I have hardcover books here and at home that I haven't read yet. That's how I view that I'm rich. I have hardcover books I may never read. (Laughs)

But even though I have success and privilege, my cousins don't. My tribe doesn't. I still get phone calls in the middle of the night—about deaths and car wrecks. I've lost uncles and cousins to violence or to slow deaths by neglect and abuse and poverty. I could try to walk away from that, to separate, but I don't. Every time I drive downtown Seattle I see dozens of homeless Indians. I would be callous beyond belief not to feel that, not to know I have cousins who are homeless in cities out there. So even if it's not happening to me directly, it's certainly happening to my family, and I have to pick up the phone. I'm incredibly privileged when I'm sitting at a typewriter, but once I get up and out of that role, I'm an Indian.