



## Reservation Blues

*Sherman Alexie*

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# Reservation Blues

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The life of Spokane Indian Thomas Builds-the-Fire irrevocably changes when blues legend Robert Johnson miraculously appears on his reservation and passes the misfit storyteller his enchanted guitar. Inspired by this gift, Thomas forms Coyote Springs, an all-Indian Catholic band who find themselves on a magical tour that leads from reservation bars to Seattle and New York--and deep within their own souls.

## Reservation Blues Details

Date : Published February 7th 2005 by Grove Press (first published January 1st 1995)

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Author : Sherman Alexie

Format : Paperback 306 pages

Genre : Fiction, Magical Realism, Literature, Novels

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## From Reader Review Reservation Blues for online ebook

### **Joe Fahey says**

This is one of those books I didn't want to end. I've been reading it off and on for a while now and I liked picking it up and having a read whenever I felt like escaping for a bit. Any book that starts out with Robert Johnson mysteriously appearing at the Spokane Indian Reservation decades after his death and handing off his enchanted guitar with its devil-dealed skills ready to transfer to its next caretaker is all right with me. I was easily charmed with the dialogue and the subtle humor of a culture and history that I haven't encountered before, at least not like this. The local youth starts a band called Coyote Springs and head off on a musical and self discovery adventure that is quite fascinating and heartfelt. I loved how the storyline weaved seamlessly in and out of dream states, present locations and another world full of mystery and wonder ... sorry, the phone just rang and I lost my train of thought ... there was also an enormous sadness built in throughout and a fascinating encounter with Cavalry Records in NYC which was quite heavy and quite brilliant as the cruel and exploitative music business was written in to help display a much bigger story than the average rise and fall story of an American rock band.

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### **Robert Mitchell says**

If reading Sherman Alexie's The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven is like running alongside a longhouse with 24 windows, getting 24 glimpses or mental snapshots of life inside, Reservation Blues is like being invited in and offered a can of Pepsi, a hot piece of fry bread and a place to crash. You are there for the awkward silences and shy smiles, the pettiness and jealousy of a small community, the loyalty and tradition, the despair and depression. In Fistfight, you're buoyed by the narrator's survival and the artificial decorum of a brief visit. In Reservation Blues you're living on the reservation; tempted to turn away from particularly painful moments and compelled to stand solemnly when "characters" you've come to care for fall beside you. In the terminology of white American history, Reservation Blues is a Tall Tale with larger-than-life everything . If we look for a more universal term, the "magical realism" of Gabriel Garcia Marquez comes to mind and explains what Alexie probably meant when he coined the term "reservation realism." Some folks have probably criticized Reservation Blues for being too preachy and heavy-handed but we're talking about a couple hundred years of brutality and genocide so I think it's fair to cut Alexie a little slack. While I was disappointed that Robert Johnson didn't play as significant a role as I expected, the real Coyote Spring's lyrics are fitting tributes to his legacy.

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### **Ana Rînceanu says**

A treasure of a book!

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### **Theophilus (Theo) says**

Fantastic. Another homerun for Sherman Alexie. The author lifts W.E.B. Dubois' color veil briefly for us to see into the complexities of life on an Indian reservation. The effects of placing the people native to the land

that is now The United States of America in what were in effect concentration camps with invisible physical fences, but psychological barriers to keep them out of the way of "civilization" are still taking a toll on them today. Having Robert Johnson suddenly appear on a reservation to get rid of his possessed guitar, given to him by that gentleman, and seek redemption is brilliant. The guitar changes hands and creates problems, more than they already had, for the Indians that use it as a way off of the reservation. I now understand why a musical group like Indigenous can sing "I Got the Blues This Morning" with such palpable feeling. You don't have to be an Indian to enjoy the masterful story told in this book. Three young Indian men take possession of Johnson's guitar and it takes control of them, or does it just accentuate the problems they faced every day. The inner conflicts they face daily, the problems with relationships between the men and women they encounter in their lives, including within their own families are enough to overpower a weaker people. Happy ending? Probably not. Tragedy and conflict, definitely. Read it.

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### **??? says**

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### **Andrew says**

Sherman Alexie is one of the few writers who has managed to survive the late '80s/early '90s vogue for all things Native American, a cultural wave that incorporated any number of now mostly forgotten Indian writers, and the Oscar given to that melodramatic piece of shit *Dances With Wolves*. And there's a reason he's survived-- he writes with a sort of Murakami sense of archetypes freely floating around, traditional stories colliding with rock musicians and corporate brands, and it's all tempered with the sort of bitter sense of humor that comes from the bitter truth of life on the Res. It would be hard for me to put labels like "timeless" or "transcendental" on *Reservation Blues*, but it nails down its particular thing awfully well.

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### **Theresa Alan says**

"They dreamed of fishing salmon but woke up as adults to shop at the Trading Post and stand in line for U.S.D.A. commodity food instead. They savagely opened cans of commodities and wept over the rancid meat."

I was first introduced to these characters when I saw the movie *Smoke Signals*, which was originally a book (that I didn't read). I liked the movie, in part because I think the actor Adam Beach is yummy. In this book, Thomas is given an enchanted guitar and forms a band with Victor and Junior. The writing is beautiful, and the subject—life on the Spokane Indian reservation—can be sad owing to the alcoholism and poverty.

For more of my reviews, please visit: <http://www.theresaalan.net/blog>

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### **Lindsay says**

Reservation Blues begins with the tortured soul of a musician, and his guitar. The blues musician, a reanimated form of the late Robert Johnson, hands his enchanted instrument to Thomas Builds the Fire. This guitar possesses skill, precision and soul, no matter who its owner is. Johnson had given his soul to the Devil in order to acquire these powers. When was given this guitar, he too felt the music radiating with its strings. This power, (note, this satanic power) compelled Thomas to create a band of his own. Two of his former bullies and two women from another tribe, joined together to form Coyote Springs. The band became successful, performing at other reservations and ultimately in New York City where they played for a record company. In a turn of events, the auditions went horribly. The guitar wouldn't play and the magic that the band had once poured from their original songs was as if it hadn't existed. This was indicative of the plight of Native Americans in what is now the United States. When things seemed to turn up for them, everything tends to fall apart. The bitterness and well as the resent I imagine that Native Americans feel, is well represented in this book through their disdain for their government distributed foods. The theme of escape was present through out each character's back story, but oddly enough each character returned.

What I especially liked about this book is its view of music and its acknowledgement of the effects music have on one's soul. As I musician, I felt closely related to Robert Johnson. Music, characterized by his guitar, had captured his being to the point where it became hard to leave the instrument's side. And because of this dependency on music, the link between music and Satan is easily identifiable and understandable. As well, Reservation Blues gave the reader insight into the lives of modern day Native Americans. Often we are all too familiar with the noble Native American riding his brave horse across green planes. This image is not only cliché, but its out dated and inaccurate of the average Native American. According to [www.jointogether.org](http://www.jointogether.org), five of the top ten causes of death are relates to alcohol and alcohol dependence. These numbers are three to four times larger than the national average. This book, while flawed in its complexity and predictability, I liked its array of situations and emotions afflicting Native Americans, a minority group often forgotten.

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### **Gypsy says**

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### **Nathan says**

I don't know what I was expecting when I picked this up. I had read some of Alexie's short fiction anthologies and enjoyed them. Upon moving to Seattle and finding out that he was a local, I picked this up at a used book store, figuring I'd give it a read. I did not expect Thomas-builds-the-fire to get under my skin and change my life. Yet somehow he did.

I grew up a stone's throw from the Southern Ute and Navajo reservations. I had friends from both tribes through most of my public school years. Yet I had never *understood* what it was to be a Native American.

"Reservation Blues" made me realize that I may never fully understand, but gave me new eyes to help me at least *see*.

Truly one of the best novels I've ever read - perhaps because it was the perfect time of my life to read it, perhaps for other reasons. But there are few books that compare in my experience for capturing a generous slice of humanity in a very true manner.

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### **Jeanne says**

*"Mr. Builds-the-Fire, I sold my soul to the Gentleman so I could play this damn guitar better than anybody ever played guitar. I'm hopin' Big Mom can get it back"*

I'd like to write a linear review of Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*, but the story is only part of the story and a linear summary would miss it. Robert Johnson – *the* Robert Johnson – gives his guitar to Thomas Builds-the-Fire, who gave it to Victor Joseph. Under the guitar's tutelage, their musical skills grew and the friends began the band Coyote Springs. Coyote Springs was joined by two Flathead women and, briefly, two white women, Betty and Veronica (yeah, Betty and Veronica). Big Mom helped them become an epic band, then Coyote Springs went to New York City – where they lost touch with their roots – and fell apart.

Read Alexie's stories only partly for the larger plot. They are an opportunity to play with language: *his words sounded like stones in his mouth and coals in his stomach*. Or here: *Some said [he was] Lakota Sioux because he had cheekbones so big that he knocked people over when he moved his head from side to side*. Thomas Builds-the-Fire's stories – and Alexie's – climb *into your clothes like sand, [and] gave you itches that could not be scratched*.

*Reservation Blues* is in the style of reservation realism: both larger than life events – meeting the long-dead including Robert Johnson, working with the magical Big Mom – and realistic emotions. Alexie's metaphors, for example, while not strictly true, are more true than what might be captured in a video.

*Reservation Blues* acknowledged and considered oppression and privilege, reconsidering history. Alexie avoided easy stereotypes, calling out both Whites and Native Americans.

Thomas thought about all the dreams that were murdered here, and the bones buried quickly just inches below the surface, all waiting to break through the foundations of those government houses built by the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

And:

[General George] Wright looked at Coyote Springs. He saw their Indian faces. He saw the faces of millions of Indians, beaten, scarred by smallpox and frostbite, split open by bayonets and bullets. He looked at his own white hands and saw the blood stains there.

*Reservation Blues* sneaks in, under your awareness, seeming to be only a silly and a goofy Summer read – and some will read it that way – but *Reservation Blues* is still reverberating in my head, something I look for in a book.

The music rose past the hitchhiker up into the sky, banged into the Big Dipper, and bounced off the bright moon. That's exactly what happened. The music howled back into the blue van, kept

howling until Coyote Springs became echoes.

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### **Victoria says**

I am very disappointed as I write this review.

At first, I was disappointed in myself because I could not, did not, will not finish this book. I wanted to, believe me. Oh, there was internal struggle. I mean, I need to read this; it's this month's pick for the book club I'm in. I need to be able to discuss this. Plus, I loved--loved--Alexie's *Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*. It's on my "guaranteed you'll love it too" list, for crying out loud. Speaking of which, Alexie's other YA novel *Flight* made me cry out loud. The ending of that book was beautiful! So, yes, I went into reading *Reservation Blues* with high hopes.

RB did not pull me in right away as I wanted it to. I kept on. I tried. But Alexie glossed over certain parts and waxed poetic on others. As I tried to get into the story and failed, I felt awful knowing I was not going to finish the book. What a terrible reader I am, I thought. I have no discipline. I'm a lazy reader (my niece has told me so and she's right).

But then I started to get mad at Alexie. He'd go on and on about some dream sequence and then another dream. God, these characters dream a lot! And it was like he was going: Here's this for you to read and THIS, but that? Oh, you want to read about that? and he threw a couple adjectives at THAT and called that scene done. And I'm the one feeling lazy?!?

So I quit. One third of the way in and I'm moving on to another book. I won't be finishing RB although I may pick up another book by ol' Sherman in the future. But you can bet that I'll expect him to draw me in within the first chapter. Just as I expect the next novel I pick up to do.

Oh, it'll be formulaic drivel, but it'll describe THIS and THAT.

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### **Maciek says**

Years after reading it I still remember the book and its characters.

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### **Daniel says**

Growing up in the Pacific Northwest, I heard about Sherman Alexie for years before I finally picked up one of his books. Unfortunately, that book was "Flight," a short little tale that bored me in the telling and left me unimpressed. Surely, I thought, this is not the kind of writing that gave Alexie his literary stature?

I picked up "Reservation Blues" because a few of my students were reading it for an English class, and I liked the idea of being able to discuss it in our adviser meetings. From the get-go, I was pulled into the story

by Alexie's prose and his talent for dialog. The idea of Robert Johnson showing up in the modern world, still carrying his guitar, kicked my ass and got me excited for something weird and different.

Johnson ends up taking a back seat early on in the story, leaving the stage open for a handful of characters who put a band together and start playing gigs on their reservation. From here, Alexie tinkers with his fictional reality, imbuing his band with talent and popularity that accrue far faster than one might expect. In between rock-and-rolling, the band members talk about their lives on the reservation, and what they might be able to make for themselves outside of it. It was these latter conversations that were my favorite part of the book, especially when the female characters talk about how difficult it has been to find a dependable man in their community. I know little about life on reservations, and the depiction that Alexie paints in this book moved and disturbed me.

I understand, now, why Alexie attracted such a large following, and why people respect his books. "Reservation Blues" is an affecting read, one that recalls the emotions it evoked whenever I think about it. I'm glad that I gave Alexie another chance.

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### **Ahmad Sharabiani says**

Reservation Blues, Sherman Alexie

Reservation Blues is a 1995 novel by American writer Sherman Alexie (Spokane-Coeur d'Alene). The novel follows the story of the rise and fall of a rock and blues band of Spokane Indians from the Spokane Reservation. In 1995, Thomas Builds-The-Fire, Junior Polatkin, and Victor Joseph, who also appear in Sherman Alexie's short story collection The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, meet American blues musician Robert Johnson. He sold his soul to the devil in 1931 and claims to have faked his death seven years later. The three boys start a rock and blues band in Spokane using Johnson's enchanted guitar.

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### **Rachel says**

This is some very American magical realism, what with its mash-up of the Robert Johnson crossroads legend with life on a Spokane Indian reservation and rock star ambitions. Perhaps even *more* American than apple pie?!??

As a concept, I love American magical realism (see also: *Swamplandia!*, which coincidentally is about people who like to pretend they're Indian). The execution of the book I really, really liked too. *Reservation Blues* is full of nightmares and alcoholism, but also, funny digs at white people and corporeal encounters with God. Alexie's writing is charming and emotional, without being over the top on either account.

There is a lot going on here thematically too. Robert Johnson selling his soul to the devil for his guitar skill (a blues legend which is taken for truth in the book) runs parallel to Thomas & Friends' quest to become rock stars, using the same guitar, ultimately hoping to escape the poverty of the reservation. To achieve this dream also involves the shirking of some essential part of themselves, their cultural "soul" too. Thomas's girlfriend Chess personifies the struggle. She resents certain traits of Indian men, but she also resents the white women who make tokens of them.

All of the mysticism and themes double back on each other in true fairy tale fashion. Alexie is a Storyteller, just like Thomas. As someone with ambitions to write but who always struggles with the damn telling a good *story* part of it all, I appreciate how intricately every part of this book loose-threads together. But I have to say that in the world of US magical realism, I do have a preference for the crunchy, lyrical wonders of Karen Russell.

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### **Laura says**

As my friend Karen said yesterday, Sherman Alexie has the ability to make you laugh and cry in the same sentence. I love how he touches on the irony of a situation that drives it deep into the loneliest part of your being instead of just staying cliched and clever on the surface.

I love how Alexie weaves between various stories seamlessly and how the mythology and the reality of Native Americans blurs hazily together. Somehow this makes the reality starker and the mythology even more wistful. I also love how Alexie always ties the present into the historical. In this book, a lot of the horror of the Native American genocide is relived through characters' dreams. It raises the question of how do we incorporate our cultures' histories into our own lives.... how do we grieve the past? How do we atone for it? How do we live our lives informed by it but not chained by it?

The movie "Smoke Signals" by Chris Eyre is based off of this book loosely. Thomas Builds-the-Fire and Victor are two of the main characters in the story. If you liked "Smoke Signals", you like this. I loved both.

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### **Mindy says**

I'm both drunk off the spiritual energy that absolutely oozes from the pages of this book, and at the same time, stone cold sober in the reality check it so effectively gives. Somewhere between the two, this book left me deeply emotional.

The plot is about a reservation rock band and their brief career under the influence of a magical (enchanted? possessed?) guitar, given to main character Thomas Builds-The-Fire, by none other than blues legend Robert Johnson.

However, the *story* is about much more than that.

It's about past and present, and how they run opposite, yet collide. It's about freedom, real and imagined.

About bad deals and trading away what's most important to you, only to regret it deeply later. It's about life's darkest emotions: Loneliness, depression, hopelessness, need.

These characters live with these things every day, and try so hard to get away from them. Some drink them away, along with the pain of their pasts, while the sober ones sit by and watch them and feel desperation. Yet they all have hope, they all cling to that hope until the very last shred of it is slipping from their hands. Then they seek out new hope, over and over and over again.

Some might find this a depressing story. But there is something beautiful in these pages. Spirit. God. Indian magic. Faith. Strength. Past lives, lived again and again. Chance meetings that change lives. Winding paths who's ends are not visible.

This book found its way into my heart in the first few pages, and is still there even as I place it on the shelf and prepare to start a new one. I highly recommend it.

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### **Ranee says**

I actually found this book along with many others in a trash pile on my way to work. I remember hearing a story of his once on NPR called, "What You Pawn I Redeem," which nearly brought me to tears by the end. Seriously, I actually sat in my car waiting for the story to finish. Pathetic? Yes. But it was a very dramatic reading. Anyway, I read the book, which was about a group of Indians on a reservation in Washington (I think most of his writing revolves around similar characters) who end up starting a rock band. They start to get pretty famous and some issues of marginalization and racial exploitation begin to arise as white record executives try to influence the group. (There's a lot more to it than this, but I don't feel like explaining.) There were some good characters in the book and I liked how Alexie wove Native American folklore into the story. But I didn't think it was as strong as the story I heard on the radio.

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### **Mission Blue says**

The whole story is kinda simple. 4 people trying to make a band and then they fail. That's it. But the whole story is not just this. Thousands of other stories are told between the lines. Stories that are filled with magic. Stories that have happened in the 19th century and stories that have happened yesterday.

I could feel the magic everywhere. I could feel the weight behind each word. I could feel the disappointment, the despair, the joy and the laughter. I could hear the music they played. The sound of the piano, the guitar and the drums. I could hear all the notes that big mom sang. And I mourned for their loss.

In a world of cruel realities a little bit of magic has to be cherished. I cherished all those little moments of magic that I felt while reading this book. Read it not just for the stories. Read it because of the magic.

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