

flight sherman alexie

Understanding Sherman Alexie's Flight: Themes, Symbolism, and Impact

Sherman Alexie's novel "Flight" is a powerful and often challenging exploration of identity, belonging, and the complex legacy of Native American history. This compelling narrative centers on Zits, a teenage protagonist grappling with rage, alienation, and a profound sense of displacement. Through Zits's unique and fantastical journey, Alexie delves into the interconnectedness of Native American experiences across different eras, offering a poignant commentary on historical trauma and the search for self. This article will provide a comprehensive analysis of "Flight," examining its central themes, the rich symbolism woven throughout the text, and the enduring impact of Alexie's storytelling on readers and the literary landscape. We will explore the literary techniques Alexie employs to bring Zits's story to life and understand why the exploration of "flight" in Sherman Alexie's work resonates so deeply.

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The Core Narrative of Sherman Alexie's "Flight": Zits and His Transformative Journey

At the heart of Sherman Alexie's "Flight" lies the character of Zits, a

fifteen-year-old orphaned Native American boy living in Seattle. Zits is a composite of anger, confusion, and a deep-seated yearning for connection. His life is marked by a series of foster homes and a constant feeling of being an outsider, even within his own Native American community. The novel opens with Zits on the verge of a drastic action, a desperate attempt to escape the pain and futility he perceives in his existence. His internal turmoil is palpable, and Alexie masterfully portrays the raw emotions of a young person burdened by a history he doesn't fully comprehend but feels acutely.

Zits: A Complex and Relatable Protagonist in "Flight"

Zits is not a simple character; he is multifaceted, flawed, and deeply human. His name itself, an acronym for "Zero Intent," reflects his initial feelings of worthlessness and lack of direction. However, as the narrative unfolds, Zits's journey is one of discovery and transformation. He grapples with questions of identity, particularly his Native American heritage, which he feels disconnected from. His experiences in the foster care system have further complicated his sense of self, leaving him adrift in a world that often seems indifferent to his struggles. Alexie uses Zits as a vessel to explore the contemporary challenges faced by many young Indigenous people.

The Supernatural Element and Zits's Time Travel in "Flight"

The unique premise of "Flight" by Sherman Alexie involves a supernatural element that propels Zits through time. After a violent encounter, Zits finds himself inhabiting the bodies of different Native American men throughout history. This extraordinary ability allows him to experience the breadth and depth of Native American existence across centuries. From a Salmon River shaman to a nineteenth-century Nez Perce warrior and even a pilot in World War II, Zits walks in the shoes of those who came before him. This narrative device is crucial to the novel's exploration of heritage and the collective memory of Indigenous peoples.

Key Themes Explored in Sherman Alexie's "Flight"

Sherman Alexie's "Flight" is rich with thematic depth, weaving together a tapestry of interconnected ideas that resonate with readers. The novel grapples with universal human experiences through the specific lens of Native American history and culture, making its messages both particular and

profoundly relevant. Alexie's skillful storytelling invites introspection on matters of heritage, identity, and the lingering effects of historical injustices.

The Search for Identity and Belonging in "Flight"

One of the most prominent themes in "Flight" is the relentless search for identity. Zits, feeling disconnected from his past and uncertain of his future, is on a quest to understand who he is. His temporal displacement forces him to confront various facets of Native American identity, from spiritual traditions to warrior culture and the impact of assimilation. He witnesses firsthand the struggles and triumphs of his ancestors, which gradually helps him piece together a more complete understanding of himself. This quest for belonging is a central driver of the narrative, reflecting the broader challenges many individuals face in defining themselves.

Historical Trauma and its Intergenerational Impact in "Flight"

Sherman Alexie unflinchingly addresses the pervasive theme of historical trauma. Through Zits's experiences as different individuals, the novel vividly portrays the devastating effects of colonization, forced assimilation, and violence on Native American communities. He witnesses the dispossession of land, the destruction of cultural practices, and the deep emotional wounds inflicted over generations. The novel argues that these traumas are not confined to the past but continue to shape the present, influencing the lives and identities of contemporary Indigenous people. The concept of "flight" can also be interpreted as an attempt to escape this burdensome history.

The Nature of Family and Connection in "Flight"

Despite the theme of alienation, "Flight" also explores the enduring importance of family and connection. As Zits inhabits different lives, he experiences moments of deep love, loyalty, and responsibility within various familial structures. He witnesses the strength of community bonds and the profound impact of mentorship. These experiences, though often fleeting, begin to chip away at Zits's isolation, showing him the vital need for human connection. The novel suggests that even in the face of adversity, the desire for family and belonging remains a fundamental human drive, and "flight" can sometimes be a misguided attempt to find it.

The Role of Storytelling and Oral Tradition in "Flight"

Storytelling is a powerful undercurrent in Sherman Alexie's "Flight." Zits's journey is, in essence, a collection of stories from the past, brought to life through his temporal shifts. The narrative itself emphasizes the importance of oral tradition in preserving history, culture, and identity within Native American communities. The elders and storytellers Zits encounters play crucial roles in shaping his understanding. The novel itself becomes a testament to the power of stories to heal, to educate, and to connect generations, offering a form of "flight" from erasure.

Symbolism and Literary Devices Employed in Sherman Alexie's "Flight"

Sherman Alexie is a master craftsman of language, and "Flight" is a testament to his skill in employing symbolism and literary devices to convey profound meaning. These elements work in concert to enrich the narrative, deepen thematic resonance, and offer readers a more immersive experience. The deliberate use of these techniques elevates the novel beyond a simple coming-of-age story.

The Significance of the Title: "Flight" as a Metaphor

The title "Flight" itself is a potent metaphor with multiple layers of meaning within the novel. On one level, it refers to Zits's desire to escape his current circumstances, his pain, and his perceived lack of future. On another, more profound level, it represents the historical "flight" of Native Americans from their ancestral lands, their cultural traditions, and their very lives due to the onslaught of colonization. It can also signify a spiritual or existential flight, a movement through time and consciousness. The act of "flight" in Alexie's work is multifaceted and central to understanding Zits's journey and the novel's broader implications.

Zits's Transformation and the Bird Symbolism in "Flight"

Birds are a recurring and significant symbol in "Flight." Zits's name itself, an acronym, could even be subtly linked to the idea of being a "zitz," a small, perhaps insignificant, creature. However, as Zits inhabits different

bodies and experiences, he gains perspective and a sense of soaring beyond his limitations. The image of flight, of soaring, becomes increasingly relevant as he connects with his ancestral past. Birds often symbolize freedom, spiritual journeys, and the connection between the earthly and the divine. Alexie uses this imagery to represent Zits's evolving understanding and his ability to transcend his immediate reality.

The "Dead Guys" and Historical Embodiment in "Flight"

The concept of Zits embodying various historical figures, whom he refers to as "dead guys," is a powerful literary device. This allows Alexie to directly confront the reader with the lived experiences of Native Americans throughout different periods. By inhabiting these bodies, Zits gains an intimate understanding of their joys, sorrows, and struggles. This technique serves to humanize historical figures and demonstrate the continuity of certain experiences and challenges across generations. It's a direct confrontation with the past, rather than an abstract discussion of it.

Sherman Alexie's Use of Voice and Narrative Perspective in "Flight"

Sherman Alexie masterfully employs Zits's first-person narrative voice in "Flight." This intimate perspective allows readers to connect directly with Zits's thoughts, emotions, and evolving worldview. The voice is raw, honest, and often laced with dark humor, a hallmark of Alexie's style. This direct access to Zits's internal monologue is crucial for understanding his transformation and for appreciating the nuances of his experiences. The shifting historical contexts are filtered through his contemporary, adolescent voice, creating a unique and compelling narrative.

The Historical and Cultural Context of Sherman Alexie's "Flight"

"Flight" by Sherman Alexie is deeply rooted in the historical realities and cultural experiences of Native American peoples. Understanding this context is vital to fully appreciating the novel's depth and its critical commentary. Alexie draws upon a rich history of Indigenous storytelling and a lived understanding of the ongoing impacts of historical events.

Colonization and its Lasting Legacy on Native Americans in "Flight"

The novel implicitly and explicitly addresses the profound and lasting legacy of colonization. Zits's journey takes him through periods where Native Americans faced displacement, cultural suppression, and violence at the hands of European colonizers. The systemic destruction of Indigenous ways of life, the forced removal from ancestral lands, and the imposition of foreign governments and religions are all echoes that resonate within the narrative. Alexie highlights how these historical injustices continue to manifest in the struggles of contemporary Native Americans.

Assimilation Policies and Their Impact on Indigenous Identity in "Flight"

Sherman Alexie's "Flight" also examines the damaging effects of assimilation policies. Throughout American history, various government policies aimed to strip Native Americans of their cultural identity, language, and traditions, often through residential schools and forced adoption. Zits's own experiences in the foster care system can be seen as a contemporary echo of these historical efforts to break familial and cultural ties. The novel underscores how these policies have contributed to a sense of displacement and a struggle for cultural continuity.

The Diversity of Native American Experiences Portrayed in "Flight"

It is important to recognize that "Flight" does not present a monolithic view of Native American experience. Alexie deliberately showcases the diversity of Indigenous cultures and histories by having Zits inhabit individuals from different tribes and time periods. From the Salmon River shaman to the Nez Perce warrior and the pilot, each character represents a unique facet of the vast tapestry of Native American life. This diversity is crucial for understanding that Native American history is not a single story but a collection of myriad experiences.

Understanding the Narrative Structure of Sherman Alexie's "Flight"

The structural choices made by Sherman Alexie in "Flight" are integral to its thematic development and the reader's engagement with the narrative. The

novel's unique organization contributes significantly to its impact and its exploration of time, memory, and identity. The unconventional approach to storytelling mirrors the fractured experiences of its protagonist.

Non-Linearity and Temporal Shifts in "Flight"

A key structural element of "Flight" is its non-linear narrative. Zits's consciousness leaps between different moments in time, creating a fragmented yet interconnected experience. This temporal fluidity allows Alexie to juxtapose past and present, highlighting the enduring relevance of historical events to contemporary issues. The reader is challenged to piece together the narrative, much like Zits himself is trying to piece together his own identity and heritage. This structure mirrors the idea of a collective memory, where different moments in time are not strictly separated.

The Role of Internal Monologue and Dialogue in "Flight"

Sherman Alexie skillfully employs both internal monologue and dialogue to shape the narrative of "Flight." Zits's internal thoughts provide direct access to his evolving understanding, his anxieties, and his moments of epiphany. The dialogues he has with various characters, both in the present and in the past, reveal his relationships and his attempts to connect. These elements work in tandem to create a deeply personal and engaging reading experience, drawing the reader into Zits's world and his psychological journey.

Pacing and the Impact of Experiential Storytelling in "Flight"

The pacing of "Flight" is carefully managed, with moments of intense action and introspection. The experiential nature of Zits inhabiting different lives means that each temporal segment is a self-contained, albeit connected, narrative. Alexie uses these shifts to control the flow of information and emotional impact, allowing readers to absorb the weight of historical experiences before moving on to the next. This creates a powerful rhythm that underscores the cyclical nature of history and the ongoing struggle for identity.

Critical Reception and Literary Impact of Sherman Alexie's "Flight"

Since its publication, "Flight" by Sherman Alexie has garnered significant critical attention and has had a notable impact on contemporary literature, particularly within the realm of Native American writing. The novel's innovative approach and its poignant exploration of complex themes have resonated with critics and readers alike, solidifying its place as an important work.

Praise for Alexie's Unique Voice and Thematic Exploration in "Flight"

Critics often lauded Sherman Alexie for his distinctive voice and his willingness to tackle challenging subjects with both raw honesty and a touch of dark humor. The novel's exploration of identity, historical trauma, and the intersection of tradition and modernity were frequently highlighted as strengths. Reviewers recognized Alexie's ability to create a compelling and sympathetic protagonist in Zits, even amidst his anger and confusion. The innovative narrative structure was also a point of frequent discussion and praise, with many acknowledging its effectiveness in conveying the novel's central themes.

"Flight" as a Catalyst for Dialogue on Native American Issues

Beyond its literary merits, "Flight" has served as a catalyst for important conversations surrounding Native American issues. The novel provides a accessible and thought-provoking entry point for readers to engage with the historical injustices and contemporary challenges faced by Indigenous peoples. By humanizing abstract historical events through Zits's personal journey, Alexie's work has contributed to a greater understanding and empathy for these ongoing struggles. The novel encourages readers to confront uncomfortable truths about history and its present-day consequences.

Sherman Alexie's Contribution to Indigenous Literature with "Flight"

With "Flight" and his other works, Sherman Alexie has made significant contributions to Indigenous literature. He has brought Native American voices and stories to a wider audience, challenging stereotypes and offering nuanced

portrayals of Indigenous life. "Flight," with its fusion of magical realism and historical narrative, exemplifies Alexie's commitment to exploring the complexities of Indigenous identity in the modern world. His writing style often influences younger Indigenous writers, encouraging them to explore their own heritage and experiences.

Exploring the "Flight" Motif in Sherman Alexie's Wider Literary Landscape

The concept of "flight," as explored in Sherman Alexie's novel of the same name, is not an isolated theme but rather a recurring motif that appears in different forms throughout his broader body of work. This recurring idea speaks to fundamental aspects of the human condition, particularly as experienced within the context of Indigenous identity and historical experience.

Escape and Transcendence as Forms of "Flight" in Alexie's Writing

In many of Sherman Alexie's stories, the idea of "flight" manifests as a desire for escape. This can be an escape from difficult circumstances, oppressive societal structures, or the weight of past traumas. Zits's literal time-traveling is a powerful, albeit fantastical, form of escape. However, Alexie also explores more grounded forms of escape, such as through art, storytelling, or even through moments of intense emotional or spiritual transcendence. These acts of "flight" are often driven by a deep-seated need for freedom and relief from suffering.

The Double-Edged Nature of "Flight" in Sherman Alexie's Narratives

While "flight" can represent liberation and healing, Sherman Alexie also acknowledges its potential for avoidance or the denial of reality. Sometimes, the attempt to flee from problems only serves to exacerbate them or to prevent personal growth. The novel "Flight" implicitly questions whether Zits's temporal journeys are a true form of progression or merely an elaborate attempt to evade confronting his present. This nuanced portrayal of "flight" adds a layer of complexity to Alexie's exploration of human psychology and the challenges of self-discovery.

Connecting "Flight" to Other Themes in Alexie's Works

The theme of "flight" in "Flight" is intricately connected to other prominent themes in Sherman Alexie's writing, such as identity, belonging, and the impact of historical trauma. The desire to "fly" away often stems from a fractured sense of self or a feeling of not belonging. The historical "flight" from ancestral lands and cultural practices directly informs the present-day struggles for identity that many characters, including Zits, face. Ultimately, Alexie uses the concept of "flight" as a lens through which to examine the enduring resilience and the profound challenges of Native American existence.

Conclusion: The Enduring Significance of "Flight" by Sherman Alexie

Sherman Alexie's "Flight" stands as a testament to the power of storytelling to illuminate complex truths about identity, history, and the human spirit. Through the extraordinary journey of Zits, the novel offers a profound and moving exploration of the intergenerational impact of historical trauma and the universal quest for belonging. Alexie's masterful use of symbolism, his distinctive narrative voice, and his willingness to engage with challenging themes have cemented "Flight" as a significant contribution to contemporary literature. The novel encourages readers to consider the multifaceted nature of "flight"—as an escape, a journey, and a metaphor for the enduring struggle for self and connection. The exploration of "flight" in Sherman Alexie's work continues to provoke thought and foster understanding, leaving an indelible mark on those who engage with Zits's transformative story.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is 'Flight' by Sherman Alexie about?

Sherman Alexie's novella 'Flight' tells the story of Zits, a Native American teenager grappling with identity, alienation, and a troubled past. He finds himself time-traveling through the bodies of his ancestors, experiencing pivotal moments in history and confronting the legacy of colonization and violence.

What are the main themes explored in 'Flight'?

Key themes in 'Flight' include identity, the Native American experience, historical trauma, intergenerational conflict, the search for belonging, and the cyclical nature of violence. The novel also touches upon the complexities

of family and fatherhood.

Who is the protagonist of 'Flight'?

The protagonist of 'Flight' is a 15-year-old Native American boy named Zits. He is an orphan who struggles with anger management and has a criminal record, leading him to an unusual encounter that propels the narrative.

What is the significance of the time-traveling aspect in 'Flight'?

The time-traveling element in 'Flight' allows Zits to vicariously experience the lives of his ancestors, offering him a unique perspective on his heritage and the historical forces that have shaped his identity. It's a powerful narrative device for exploring the connection between past and present.

What is the writing style of Sherman Alexie like in 'Flight'?

Sherman Alexie's writing in 'Flight' is often characterized by its raw, direct, and darkly humorous voice. He blends contemporary slang with poignant reflections, creating a distinctive narrative style that reflects the protagonist's voice and experiences.

What kind of critical reception did 'Flight' receive?

'Flight' generally received positive critical reception. Reviewers often praised Alexie's innovative storytelling, his exploration of complex themes, and his ability to capture the voice of a troubled adolescent. Some noted the novella's challenging but rewarding narrative structure.

Is 'Flight' considered part of a larger body of work by Sherman Alexie?

While 'Flight' is a standalone novella, it shares thematic connections and is often discussed alongside Sherman Alexie's other works that explore Native American identity, family, and the challenges faced by contemporary Indigenous peoples, such as 'The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian'.

What makes 'Flight' a relevant or trending read today?

'Flight' remains relevant due to its continued exploration of themes like systemic racism, historical injustice, and the search for identity, which are ongoing societal concerns. Alexie's powerful storytelling and his unique

perspective on the Native American experience ensure its enduring impact and discussion.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Sherman Alexie's work and life, with descriptions:

1. The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

This is Sherman Alexie's most well-known novel, a coming-of-age story about Arnold Spirit Jr., a Spokane Indian boy who leaves his reservation to attend an all-white high school. The book deals with themes of identity, poverty, racism, and the struggle to find belonging. It's filled with humor and heartache as Junior navigates two vastly different worlds.

2. Flight

This novel tells the story of a troubled Native American teenager who believes he is the reincarnation of various historical figures, including Native American activists and astronauts. He encounters a mysterious elder woman who guides him through his fragmented memories and helps him confront his past. The book explores themes of identity, spirituality, and the cyclical nature of history.

3. Indian Killer

This suspenseful novel follows a Native American protagonist who adopts the persona of a serial killer targeting white men who exploit Native American culture. As the murders escalate, the story delves into the complexities of Native identity, historical trauma, and the anger simmering beneath the surface. The narrative questions who is truly responsible for violence and the perpetuation of injustice.

4. Reservation Blues

This novel centers on a band called Coyote Springs, comprised of Native American musicians struggling to make it in the world while dealing with the realities of reservation life. Their music is a powerful expression of their heritage and their current struggles, often blending traditional sounds with rock and blues. The book explores themes of addiction, family, and the enduring spirit of Native culture.

5. Ten Little Indians

This collection of short stories offers glimpses into the lives of various Native American characters, each facing distinct challenges and triumphs. Alexie uses his signature blend of humor and pathos to explore themes of family, cultural assimilation, and the search for meaning. The stories highlight the diverse experiences within Native communities and the complexities of modern identity.

6. The Toughest Indian in the World

This collection of short stories showcases Sherman Alexie's raw and often humorous voice as he writes about Native American men. The stories feature

characters grappling with alcoholism, relationships, and their place in a world that often misunderstands or dismisses them. Each narrative provides a poignant look at resilience and the enduring strength of the human spirit.

7. _You Don't Have to Say You Love Me_

This memoir is a powerful and unflinching account of Sherman Alexie's complicated relationship with his mother. It details her struggles with alcoholism, her fierce love for her children, and the deep impact she had on his life and work. The book is marked by raw emotion and a poignant exploration of grief, memory, and the lasting bonds of family.

8. _Blasphemy: New and Selected Poems_

This collection gathers poems from across Sherman Alexie's career, offering a potent and often provocative exploration of his life and identity. His poetry is characterized by its sharp wit, emotional honesty, and unflinching gaze at themes of race, sex, and spirituality. The poems often blur the lines between the sacred and the profane, reflecting his unique worldview.

9. _War Dances_

This collection of interconnected stories and poems explores the experiences of a Native American man named Walter who is grappling with aging, illness, and the complexities of his past. He finds solace and connection through music, particularly through his passion for playing the violin. The work delves into themes of mortality, love, and the search for peace in the face of life's inevitable challenges.

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