

Notes on *Flight Patterns* by Sherman Alexie

Through the Native American narrator's voice, explore the themes of identity, family, self-purpose, stereotypes, and racism, and the rejection of society's illusions, in the text. In addition, consider how the text is a lens through which to look at race relations and identity in a post 9/11 America.

As a beautiful and lyrical example of Native American fiction, this story from Alexie's *Ten Little Indians* speaks from a direct and honest indigenous perspective while transcending cultural boundaries. Students will receive a good dose of multicultural awareness by reading this text; my experience has shown that they will also enjoy reading it. Each time I have assigned "Flight Patterns," even the most complacent students are full of opinions and questions for discussion. This is the kind of reader response I find priceless in the classroom.

Perhaps students are responding to the irreverence Alexie shows on subjects as wide-ranging as political correctness, the arts, and class. Young adults often identify with such blatant disregard for society's most cherished illusions, and in Alexie students seem to find an ally. Even students unfamiliar with the Native American fictional voice will find Alexie engaging, realistic, and poetic.

At its core, "Flight Patterns" focuses on the nonwhite individual and the preconceptions of skin color in American society. More specifically, the story is a glimpse of the minority voice on contemporary issues such as what it means to be an Indian and what it means to be a minority American, particularly after 9/11. When teaching this text, I encourage students to examine both their own stereotypes and those of society. What ideas do we take for granted as truth? How do these assumptions silence one's individuality and thus limit one's own growth? Alexie himself claims that of the thousands of Indians he has met, none ever stood on a mountain waiting for a sign.

I teach the story as an opportunity for students to see the banality of societal labels. After students have read it once outside of class, we read it a second time out loud in class. I discovered by accident, but with much success, how great the text sounds when read aloud. In the following discussion, I have students list each moment in the story when a character disrupts their stereotypical expectation. William, they usually point out, is a Spokane Indian who has decided to live off the reservation and raise a family in the suburbs; he wears suits purchased on the Internet and travels on business. They note, likewise, that Fekadu, an Ethiopian fighter pilot, drives a taxi. Examination of the stereotypes these observations reveal often opens up exploration of themes embedded in the story, such as those of kindness, family, and fear of the other.

Inevitably, we reach the long insightful dialogue between William and Fekadu. I usually ask two students to play the characters' parts in this pivotal scene and ask the other students to ponder the author's larger purpose as they listen to what these two men reveal. I utilize this opportunity to explore the nature and importance of race and ethnicity in the culture. Although my focus has been on the contemporary culture of the United States, the discussion could just as easily be applied to any number of cultures. William tells Fekadu that he is often incorrectly identified as a "long-haired Mexican" by white people. Many of my students easily relate to this possible conflict between one's identity and one's skin color; they may also understand William's expressed fear of "little brown men" in a post- 9/11 world. Simply put, William and Fekadu, like all Americans, find themselves at personal and cultural crossroads. William, through his

experiences, is faced with poignant, tragic, and sometimes extraordinary moments of being that test his loyalties, his beliefs, and his notion of identity.