

# Indian Killer Discussion Questions

## Sherman Alexie

### Biography:

Sherman J. Alexie, Jr., was born in October 1966 and is a poet, writer, and filmmaker. A Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, he grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, WA, about 50 miles northwest of Spokane, WA. Alexie has published 18 books to date.

Alexie is an award-winning and prolific author and occasional comedian. Much of his writing draws on his experiences as a modern Native American. Sherman's best known works include *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, *Smoke Signals*, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. He lives in Seattle, Washington.

### Cast of Characters:

- **John Smith** - a twenty-seven year old Indian man, adopted at birth by white parents.
- **Daniel and Olivia Smith** – John's adopted parents.
- **Father Duncan** - a Spokane Indian Jesuit priest who baptized John.
- **Mark Jones** - a young boy who is kidnapped from his bedroom by the Indian Killer.
- **Clarence Mather** - professor of Native American Literature.
- **Paul and Paul Too** - two black men who work in an all-night donut shop. John's only real friends.
- **Marie Polatkin** - an undergraduate student at the University of Washington. A student activist.
- **Reggie Polatkin** - Marie's cousin. A mixed-blood Indian who was kicked out of University for attacking Clarence Mather.
- **David Rogers** – a white college student taking Native American Literature.
- **Aaron Rogers** - a college student whose brother is supposedly murdered by the Indian Killer. He begins attacking Indians for revenge.
- **Truck Shultz** - talk radio host who deliberately sets out to raise emotions and encourage white aggression towards the Indian community.
- **Jack Wilson** - former Seattle policeman-turned-crime-writer. Identifies himself as an Indian.
- **Ty** - one of Reggie Polatkin's Indian friends who helps him beat a few white men.
- **Harley** - one of Reggie Polatkin's Indian friends who helps him beat a few white men. He is deaf.

### Discussion Questions:

1. Did you like the book?
2. Some reviewers have called this novel a mystery; others call it a thriller. What would you classify it as? Why?

3. Alexie wrote the novel in third-person format and moves between several characters' perspectives. Did you like that narration style? Why or why not?
4. How is the title "Indian Killer" a play on words?
5. What do we learn about Indian/white relationships from reading this novel? Are there differences between what white people think about Indians and what Indians know about themselves?
6. How do the circumstances of John Smith's birth and adoption impact his life? Did he ever bond with any parent?
7. What kind of parents are Olivia and Daniel Smith – good/bad? How does this affect John?
8. Not knowing his own tribal heritage, John tells people who ask what he believes they want to hear. How does this affect his interactions with both White people and other Indians? Why doesn't he just tell people the truth?
9. What is John Smith looking for in the Indian people he meets? How does what he sees differ from what he's learned from his adoptive parents? What explains the difference?
10. At different points throughout the book, John imagines what his life would have been like on the reservation, complete with a loving Indian family. How does this affect John and his interactions with the people he comes into contact with?
11. John Smith has a "need to kill the white man who was responsible for everything that had gone wrong." (276) What is "everything?"
12. Who are the "frauds" that Marie fights against? Why does she make this judgment? Is it fair?
13. In Indian Killer, why does Wilson want so badly to be a part of Indian culture? Does he not feel accepted by white culture?
14. What do you think about the radio personality (shock-jock) Truck Schultz? His actions inflame the issues surrounding the Indian Killer and the Native American community. Do you think he is responsible for how his show affects Seattle?
15. Describe a character in the novel you find most disturbing? Why?
16. For which character do you have the most sympathy? Why?
17. What seems to be motivating the killer?
18. Who do you think is the Indian Killer in the novel?
19. Sherman does not tell us who the killer is. One review stated, "Ultimately, the killer is not an individual person but is the 'spirit' of the injustice, terror and violence inflicted on Indians from the onset of colonization. That spirit is immortal and will continue to immerge from time to time until the purpose of the Ghost Dance (the utter destruction of the white people) is realized." What do you think about that statement?
20. What does it means to be a real Indian? Who has the right to tell their stories?

21. The mentally ill and homeless make up many of the main characters in this story. What do you think about the way it was portrayed in the book?
22. This book covers a lot of social justice topics. Do you have any comments/thoughts on the book's perspective on history, hysteria, scapegoating, and/or the failures of our justice system?
23. Other interesting topics touched on in the book are revenge and retribution, white guilt, co-opting other cultures, and cross-cultural adoption. Do you have any thoughts/comments/opinions?

**References:**

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