TRAVEL

Flight Sherman Alexie

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Navigating Identity and Redemption: A Deep Dive into Flight by Sherman Alexie

Sherman Alexie stands as one of the most distinctive and powerful voices in contemporary American literature. A poet, filmmaker, and novelist of Spokane and Coeur d'Alene heritage, Alexie has spent his career dismantling stereotypes while simultaneously exploring the complex, often painful terrain of Native American identity in the modern world. Among his most compelling works is the 2007 novel **Flight**, a raw, darkly humorous, and deeply moving story that transcends the boundaries of a typical young adult novel. **Flight Sherman Alexie** presents a narrative that is at once a **coming-of-age story**, a historical odyssey, and a profound meditation on forgiveness. This article provides a comprehensive exploration of the novel, examining its plot, characters, central themes, and enduring literary significance.

The Premise of Flight: A Journey Through Time and Trauma

At its heart, **Flight Sherman Alexie** tells the story of a troubled 15-year-old boy named Zits, a nickname he despises but has come to accept. Zits is a self-described "time bomb," a half-Native American, half-Irish orphan who has spent his life bouncing through a series of failed foster homes. Riddled with **abandonment issues**, rage, and a profound sense of dislocation, Zits is a character on the verge of eruption. The novel opens with him in jail, a familiar setting for a boy who has learned that anger is his only reliable defense mechanism.

Sherman Alexie masterfully sets the stage for a narrative that is anything but linear. After being manipulated by a charismatic white supremacist named Justice, Zits commits a horrific act of violence, walking into a bank with the intention of killing as many people as possible. Immediately after pulling the trigger, Zits is thrust into the first of several extraordinary **time-travel sequences**. This is where **Flight**transforms from a gritty social realism story into a metaphysical journey. Zits finds himself inhabiting the bodies of different people at pivotal moments in American history, experiencing the violence and trauma of the past firsthand.

The Mechanics of Zits' Time Travel

Alexie does not bog the reader down with scientific explanations for the time travel. Instead, it functions as a magical realist device, a spiritual journey forced upon Zits as a form of **cosmic intervention**. Each "flight" deposits Zits into the consciousness of another person, forcing him to see the world through their eyes. He experiences:

- A FBI agent in the 1970s during a violent confrontation with Native American activists, providing a perspective on state-sanctioned violence.
- A young Indian boy at the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876, witnessing the terror and chaos of war from the "losing" side.
- An elderly Indian tracker working for the U.S. Cavalry in the 19th century, forcing Zits to confront collaboration and survival.
- A white soldier committing atrocities during the brutal Indian Boarding School era, a period of cultural genocide that Alexie has often written about.
- His own father as a young man, providing a heartbreaking look at the man who abandoned him.

These are not merely history lessons. They are visceral, painful immersions that force Zits—and the reader—to

understand that **violence and trauma** are cyclical. The lines between victim and perpetrator blur dramatically. Zits, who began the novel as a victim, is forced to inhabit the bodies of those who inflicted pain. This structural choice is the genius of **Flight Sherman Alexie**; it prevents the reader from seeing history in simple terms of good versus evil.

Character Analysis: Zits as the Everyman Orphan

The protagonist of **Flight** is one of Alexie's most memorable characters. Zits is not immediately likable. He is cynical, foul-mouthed, and filled with a **self-destructive rage**. He refers to his acne as a map of his misery. However, Alexie allows the reader to see beyond the gruff exterior. Zits' humor, though dark, is a survival tool. His intelligence, though buried, is evident in his sharp observations.

The name "Zits" is a constant reminder of his adolescent pain and societal rejection. He defines himself by his flaws because that is how the world has treated him. The journey of **Flight** is his journey toward redefining that identity. As Zits travels through history, he collects pieces of other people's stories. He learns that his own pain is not unique but is part of a much larger tapestry of **American suffering**. He also learns that survival often requires an act of profound empathy.

Supporting Characters and Their Roles

Flight Sherman Alexie is populated with figures who serve as mirrors and foils for Zits.

- Justice: The white supremacist who mentors Zits is a chilling figure. He represents the seductive power of hate. Justice offers Zits a sense of belonging and family, but it is a family built on racism and violence. This relationship highlights how easily a lost boy can be radicalized when he feels unseen by society.
- Officer Dave: After the time travel begins, Zits meets a kind police officer who represents a paternal figure he never had. The relationship between Zits and Officer Dave is the emotional anchor of the novel, suggesting that redemption is possible through genuine human connection. Dave is patient, wise, and sees the good in Zits that Zits refuses to see in himself.
- Mary: A mysterious girl Zits encounters, Mary represents the possibility of love and normalcy. She is a grounding presence, a vision of a life that could be free from violence.

Major Themes in Flight by Sherman Alexie

Flight is a dense novel that tackles a wide range of complex themes. Understanding these themes is essential to appreciating the depth of Alexie's work.

The Cycle of Violence

The most dominant theme in **Flight Sherman Alexie** is the cyclical nature of violence. The novel argues that violence is a disease passed from generation to generation, from culture to culture. Zits begins the novel as a product of this cycle. He was abandoned, so he learned to hurt. He then intended to hurt others. Through his time travels, he sees how the **historical trauma** of the **Native American experience**—massacres, forced assimilation, boarding schools—created the conditions for the violence and alcoholism that plague his own family. He also sees that the perpetrators of that violence were themselves often trapped in a cycle, acting out of fear, duty, or a twisted sense of patriotism. The novel asks: Can the cycle be broken?

Identity and Displacement

Zits struggles with a fractured identity. He is half-Native, half-Irish, but feels fully alienated from both cultures. He is an orphan in a world that seems to have no place for him. The time travel forces him to consider what "Indian" means across different centuries. Is it a racial category? A cultural one? A political one? By inhabiting a white

soldier or an FBI agent, Zits recognizes that identity is fluid and often situational. The search for a stable, authentic self is a central conflict of the novel. **Flight Sherman Alexie**suggests that identity is not something you are born with, but something you construct through your choices and your understanding of history.

Forgiveness and Empathy

If violence is the disease, empathy is the cure in Alexie's universe. Zits' time travels are a lesson in radical empathy. He is forced to feel the fear of a soldier about to die, the grief of a father, and the rage of a colonized people. This constant shifting of perspective breaks down his ability to see people as "good" or "bad." **Forgiveness** in the novel is not about excusing terrible acts. It is about understanding the context of those acts. The climax of the novel hinges on Zits' ability to forgive—not only his father, but also himself. This act of **self-forgiveness**is presented as the only true path toward peace.

The Role of Humor in Tragedy

Sherman Alexie is a master of the tragicomic. Even as Zits faces the darkest moments of history, the novel is filled with sharp, witty dialogue and absurd situations. This humor is not a distraction from the pain; it is a survival mechanism. Alexie argues that **Native American resilience**is partly built on a strong sense of humor. Being able to laugh at the absurdity of racism or the cruelty of fate is a way of refusing to be completely defeated. Zits' sarcastic internal monologue keeps the novel from becoming unbearably heavy, and it makes the moments of genuine tragedy hit even harder.

Literary Style and Structure

Flight Sherman Alexieis written in a tight, first-person narrative. Alexie's prose is economical but evocative. He uses short chapters and rapid scene shifts to mirror Zits' chaotic mental state. The language is authentic to a modern teenager, peppered with profanity and pop culture references, which grounds the fantastical elements of the story in a recognizable reality.

The structure of the novel, moving between the present day and historical flashbacks (or "flights"), is reminiscent of a **picaresque novel**, but with a profound moral center. Each flight teaches Zits a specific lesson. The time travel also allows Alexie to critique the **American mythology** of the West. By showing the brutality of Manifest Destiny from the inside, he deconstructs the heroic narratives taught in many history books. This makes **Flight** an important text for readers interested in **critical history** and **decolonizing literature**.

Comparison to Other Works by Sherman Alexie

Readers familiar with Alexie's other works will find many resonances in **Flight**. The themes of **alcoholism, father-son relationships**, and the legacy of the **Indian boarding schools** are central to his most famous novel, **The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian**. However, **Flight** is a darker, more overtly violent book. While **Part-Time Indian** is a hopeful story about a boy finding his place in the world, **Flight**is more concerned with the existential crisis of a boy who might destroy the world.

Alexie's short story collection **The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven** also explores the theme of time and memory, but **Flight** uses the science fiction trope to make the point more literal. This blending of genres—literary fiction, YA, historical fiction, and magical realism—is a hallmark of Alexie's willingness to break rules. He is a writer who refuses to be confined to a category, and **Flight** is a perfect example of that artistic freedom.

Critical Reception and Impact

Upon its release, **Flight** received generally positive reviews, though it was sometimes overshadowed by the massive success of **The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian** (which was published the same year). Critics praised Alexie's ability to handle difficult subject matter with sensitivity and honesty. The time travel device, while potentially gimmicky in less skilled hands, was lauded as effective and emotionally resonant.

However, some critics noted that the novel's resolution felt a bit too neat. Zits' transformation from a potential mass murderer to a hopeful young man occurs quickly in the final chapters. Alexie does not dwell on the practical consequences of Zits' initial actions. This is perhaps the novel's greatest weakness; it prioritizes the spiritual and emotional journey over realistic consequences. Yet, for many readers, this is also the novel's strength. **Flight Sherman Alexie** is ultimately a **redemption story**, and redemption narratives require a leap of faith.

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