

Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez: Reviews of *The Summer of Black Widows* and *The Business of Fancysdancing*

Alexie contrasts his most recent collections of poetry, *The Summer of Black Widows*, with his earlier volume, *The Business of Fancysdancing*. . . . The earlier collection of stories and poems was very popular in Indian country, presenting direct and often raw depictions of reservation life. Its realities are stark and troubling, guaranteed to disturb any preconceived notions readers might have about Indian America. And the poems and stories are told with engaging strategies of oral storytelling traditions, including the humor and epigrammatic statements that sum up centuries of struggle. As Alexie writes in the title poem, "A promise is just like money./ Something we can hold

. . . / It's business, a fancydance to fill where it's empty." The pieces in this book are orally driven and very accessible. In contrast, Alexie's recent book of poetry has been received more positively by the literary community than in Indian country. He explains that the poems are more literary and less accessible to the broader audience he wants to reach.

The title poem, "The Summer of Black Widows," is a tightly crafted work in which Alexie uses repetition, meter, and alliteration to convey a story about the power to survive and endure regardless of the extent to which people and cultures attempt to silence them or twist them into lies. These are stories created by the woven webs of black widow spiders. Alexie's choice of naming these story weavers "black widows" underscores the fact that the stories, like their creators, are venomous and dangerous. And even though some might try to destroy ("poison") or contain ("capture") the stories, there is no power in this world ("nothing, neither fire/ nor water, neither rock nor wind") that "can bring them down"?not literally from the rafters where they are safely out of our reach, nor metaphorically from their protected positions as harbingers of truth.

Alexie warns us that we fear the truths in these stories, so we try to capture them and poison them. Like the "bundles of stories/ . . . Up in the corners of our old houses," stories that previously fell like rain now must be protected from our reach so that we will not destroy them. Perhaps this poem, in some ways, serves as a metaphor for Alexie's own writing as he grapples with the process of telling his stories and truths in ways that compromise neither them, him, or his readers. Either way, the poem, aimed at a literary audience, serves as a warning to his readers to respect both the presences and absences of stories.

From Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez, "Fancy Dancer: A Profile of Sherman Alexie."
Poets and Writers January/February 1999: 54-59.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Author:

Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez [2]

Criticism Target:

Sherman Alexie

Item Reviewed:

The Summer of Black Widows [3]

The Business of FancyDancing [4]

Source URL: <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/content/susan-berry-brill-de-ramirez-reviews-summer-black-widows-and-business-fancydancing>

Links

[1] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/susan-berry-brill-de-ramirez>

[3] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/books/summer-black-widows>

[4] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/books/business-fancydancing>