

Indian Killer

From Columbus' to the present the Indians of North America have been subject to much crime and atrocity, misunderstanding and misinformation. In 1996 Sherman Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian living in Seattle and writing in English, published a fascinating and complex novel on the guilt and trauma ridden Indian – or, to be politically correct, Native American – issue.

by Lorenz Becher

Some Christian History

When the so-called pilgrim fathers left Plymouth for North America aboard the Mayflower in 1620 they were driven by the desire to build the city of God, to leave the old world of sin and injustice behind and to start a new and better world. But first, with a bible in one hand and a gun in the other, they had to make room for themselves and kill a few hundred thousand Native Americans. God had surely not meant those savages to stop them. After all they only hunted as much as they could eat, they did not speak a word of English and they had never heard of Jesus Christ. Furthermore they were not white and their culture was only about four to nine thousand years old and they were absolutely ignorant. But what did the English Puritans know or try to know? After all, as the famous American western movie star John Wayne once said, there were families of settlers who needed farm land and homes and the redskins wouldn't let them have it. So some blood needed to be shed. That's only natural, isn't it? The Native Americans defended their tribes and homelands heroically, but they were fighting a losing battle against the superior war technology of the English. Along with the 75,000,000 buffaloes that were shot for their skins and left to rot in the American sun, 400,000 Native Americans were killed in the Indian Wars ending with the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee. The English had proved their cultural superiority once again and made an important step ahead in their paving the way for the future world domination of the English language. Together with the countless Australian Aborigines, New Zealand Maori, Indians from India and Africans the Native Americans were slaughtered and sacrificed to make English the world language (now first language for 375 million people, second language for another 375 million people and about a quarter of the world's population is thought to be able to communicate competently in English today) and to enable Bill Gates to sell Windows everywhere in the world today. It was never the weight of the word or the better argument but a long trail of blood that has lead to the new world of the West. And the essence of the puritanical Christian spirit proved to be essentially materialistic and not very spiritual indeed.

Some Indian History

Over some hundreds and thousands of years an estimate of one to two thousand Native American cultural systems had existed and developed up to the arrival of the white man. They all had their distinctive traditions, religions, stories, myths, artistic styles (totem poles, carpets, fabrics, pottery, tools, weapons, paintings etc.) and languages. They all had their characteristic ways of life and their laws. Some concentrated on hunting or fishing (some even went after whales), others on farming. Some Indian tribes were nomads, others lived in villages or cities. Some lived in the desert and barely eked out a miserable existence. Others lived along rivers that provided them with all the salmon, clam and candle fish they wanted. (Candle fish is so rich in oil that dried in the sun, you can burn it like a candle.) Most of the tribes were patriarchic organizations, many of them, however, seem to have given the women more rights than many a European people did at the time. There even exist theories about a small number of matriarchal tribes. Another very progressive phenomenon of the Indians is the custom called potlatch

known by many tribes. The potlatch is a great feast of gift giving. The richer and more highly esteemed a chief was, the more splendid and sumptuous were his potlatches, the function of which was to provide for the poor and to prevent concentration of too much wealth and power. Today the descendants of the one time proud and independent chiefs and tribes live in about 50 reservations across the USA. Many have alcohol or drug problems, they are culturally and psychically lost and they have enormous identity problems. On the surface very little seems to link them with Crazy Horse or Sitting Bull, the Shawnee, Cherokee, Catawba, Tuscarora, Creek, Mescalero, Comanche, Wichita, Natchez, Chickasaw, Delaware, Kiowa, Cheyenne, Assiniboin, Blackfoot, Navaho, Shoshoni, Apache, Sioux etc. But today, there is a growing Native American awareness and the Indian spirit that seems to have slumbered so long is waking up: in politics (the Clackamas, e.g. are now reclaiming their sacred meteorite Tomanoas, which was taken away from them by the whites about a century ago), on the reservations, at universities and in literature and music.

Sherman Alexie

Sherman Alexie is one of the most prominent writers of Native American literature. His novel *Indian Killer* is a combination of detective and mystery story on the one hand and a study of modern Indian search for identity on the other. A murderer kills white people in Seattle, maiming and feasting on the victims and leaving behind the crossed feathers of an owl, the bird which often symbolizes death in Indian mythologies. The novel builds up more and more suspense and perspectives, scenes and characters as it unfolds on four hundred pages of great literature. John is a handsome tall Indian who was adopted by a white middle class family right after his birth. He does not know his tribal identity and he has grown up in white America without ever feeling at home there. His colleagues at work on the skyscraper construction site are scared of the way he looks at them and does not talk or drink beer with them. His foster parents try to get through to him, but they fail. Then there is Native American Mary, a committed fighter for the Indian cause, free lance social worker in the Indian ghetto and gifted and ambitious student at university. Her professor is a pseudo half Indian and friend of the Indians just like Wilson, an ex-cop who is writing mystery novels with an Indian hero. There are Indians who brutally beat up random white victims and white guys who do the same with Indians. There is Truck, a radio man who pours oil into the fire of racial hatred lit by the serial killer. And throughout the entire novel there is John's memory of father Duncan, a Native American Jesuit he used to know, who walked into the desert one day, never to come back anymore. The novel skillfully and subtly links the past and the present and the cultural, political, social and private aspects of the Indian theme and it cleverly plays with the ambiguity and the implicit question of the title: are we dealing with a killer who is an Indian or are we in fact dealing with the killing of the Indians (which is still not over)?

Native American Expression

The art and culture of the Native Americans is well-documented in many books and museums. In the vortex of world music, Indian singing and drum beating have found their way onto CDs. A special CD I can recommend in this context is Robbie Robertson's *Music for the Native Americans*. The ex-guitarist and singer of the rock legend The Band is part Indian himself and his blend of Indian music and American rock is a great artistic statement about the cultural potential that would lie in the fusion of cultures (as opposed to the disruptive power of cultural opposition practiced so long.) Other books by Sherman Alexie are: *Reservation Blues* and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist fight in Heaven* (basis of the wonderful movie *Smoke Signals*). And further Indian titles of great literary quality are: Leslie Marmon Silko: *Ceremony*, N. Scott Momaday: *House of Dawn*, Ray A. Young Bear: *Remnants of the First Earth*, Hyemeyohsts Storm: *Seven Arrows*.