

# When the Story Stolen Is Your Own

By Sherman Alexie

Sunday, Jan. 29, 2006 in *Time* magazine

In 1999 a Native American writer, born fragile and poor on a destitute Indian reservation, published an essay, "The Blood Runs like a River Through My Dreams," in *Esquire*. It earned a National Magazine Award nomination and was later expanded into a memoir of the same title that became a finalist for a PEN/Martha Albrand Award. That rez-to-riches tale of courage and redemption sounds like a Horatio Alger story, doesn't it? It should be a movie. Or at least an episode of A&E's *Biography*. Of course, I'm biased, because, well, it's my story. Kind of.

I did not write "The Blood Runs like a River Through My Dreams." But raised fragile and poor on the destitute Spokane Indian Reservation in Washington State, I published a story, "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," in *Esquire* in 1993. My story, which features an autobiographical character named Thomas Builds-the-Fire who suffers a brain injury at birth and experiences visionary seizures into his adulthood, was a finalist for a National Magazine Award and the basis for the film *Smoke Signals*, which won the Audience Award at Sundance in 1998.

Nasdijj, the one-name author of "The Blood Runs like a River Through My Dreams," claimed to be the son of a Navajo mother and a white father. His memoir features a child named Tommy Nothing Fancy who suffers from and dies of a seizure disorder. Quite the coincidence, don't you think?

Of course, after reading Nasdijj's essay and book, I suspected that he was a literary thief and a liar. As a Native American writer and multiculturalist, I worried that Nasdijj was a talented and angry white man who was writing as a Native American in order to mock multicultural literature. I imagined that he would eventually reveal himself as a hoaxer and shout, "You see, people, there is nothing real or authentic about multicultural literature. Anybody can write it."

Angry, competitive, saddened, self-righteous and more than a little jealous that this guy was stealing some of my autobiographical thunder, I approached Nasdijj's publishers and told them his book not only was borderline plagiarism but also failed to mention specific tribal members, clans, ceremonies and locations, all of

which are vital to the concept of Indian identity. They took me seriously, but they didn't believe me.

And how do I feel now that the author of an investigative story in *L.A. Weekly* believes that Nasdijj is a fraud and actually a white writer named Timothy Barrus? Vindicated? Well, sure. I dream of leaving "I told you so" messages on many voice mails, although unlike James Frey's publisher, who initially supported his lies and moral evasions about his exaggerated memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, Nasdijj's publisher dropped him because of personality conflicts even before the *L.A. Weekly* story came out. Of course, Frey has sold millions of books and will probably sell a few million more. Nasdijj hasn't sold millions of books, and he will probably fade into obscurity. In response to the *L.A. Weekly* story, Nasdijj posted a rambling statement on his blog saying that people should pay attention to "real scandals" like poverty.

So why should we be concerned about his lies? His lies matter because he has cynically co-opted as a literary style the very real suffering endured by generations of very real Indians because of very real injustices caused by very real American aggression that destroyed very real tribes. He isn't the first to do it. In 1991 the American Booksellers Association gave its book-of-the-year award to Forrest Carter's Cherokee-themed memoir, *The Education of Little Tree*, despite the documented fact that Carter was really Asa Carter, a rabid segregationist and the author of George Wallace's infamous war cry, "Segregation today! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!"

I can only hope that Nasdijj's readers will look to Oprah for inspiration. After initially defending the essential truth of Frey's memoir, a selection for her book club, Oprah changed her mind, admitted that she had been duped, invited Frey back onto her show and called him a liar. When was the last time a public figure like Oprah admitted to being wrong? When was the last time a powerful person like Oprah issued a genuine public apology? I think all the people who profited from Nasdijj's fraud should take heed of that lesson and issue public apologies to Native Americans in general and to Navajo in particular. And I hope we won't be waiting for that apology as long as the rivers flow, the grasses grow and the winds blow.

-- Sherman Alexie, a member of the Spokane tribe, is the author of 17 books.

The edit is made and owned by bizzlesgf on Instagram! Should you happen to use my cover for your own story, I'll be forced to report you. badboy. badgirlgoodboy. boy. crime. danger. drama.Â Get notified when STOLEN is updated. Continue with FacebookContinue. Continue with GoogleContinue. OR. Username. Email. Password.