

Native American author Sherman Alexie taken down in #MeToo hysteria

By Kayla Costa
19 March 2018

The career of one of the most prominent Native American authors, Sherman Alexie, is threatened with destruction based upon vague and unsubstantiated allegations of sexual harassment.

Alexie (born 1966) is considered a significant contemporary American author, and has written children's books, adult fiction and essays that draw heavily on his experiences as a Native American both on the rural lands of the Spokane Reservation and in Seattle's urban sprawl.

He has won numerous national literary awards over the past quarter-century and committed much of his life to non-profit arts education programs for Native youth. Due to the political and social content of his themes, his work was banned from Arizona schools in 2012 under the right-wing, anti-immigrant House Bill 2281, which prohibited ethnic studies. His acclaimed collection of short stories *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) was adapted into the Canadian-American dark comedy film, *Smoke Signals* (1998).

Despite the absence of any investigation or due process, Alexie's career is now hanging in the balance. In the face of the controversy, he has made the decision not to accept the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Nonfiction awarded by the American Library Association for *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me: A Memoir*. His publisher has also delayed the release of the paperback edition of the book.

In addition, officials of various literary organizations are attempting to delete his name. Debbie Reese, the editor of *American Indians in Children's Literature*, has removed his photos, name and works from all previous publications on their website. In a dreadful, McCarthyite "Open Letter," Reese, based on "private conversations," announced her decision to expunge

Alexie. Remarkably, without producing a shred of evidence to back up her claims, she wrote, "Far too many people adore him and think that they're hip to Native life because they read his books. If you're one of those people, please set his books aside. Read other Native writers. Don't inadvertently join him in hurting other Native writers."

Seattle journalist and author Paulette Perhach has done the same, editing out references to him in her new book.

The American Indian Art Institute in Santa Fe, New Mexico has changed the name of its Sherman Alexie Scholarship to the MFA Alumni Scholarship, distancing themselves from any further contact with the writer. Institute director Eric Davis told the *Seattle Times*, "We thought someone might feel awkward accepting the scholarship—we don't want a female student to say, 'I don't want to accept the scholarship' and hurt her scholastic opportunities."

To produce such a serious backlash, one might think that Alexie had committed serious crimes, or had stepped very far out of line, with a clear and systematic history of damaging women sexually, physically and psychologically. However, he is merely another victim in the reactionary #MeToo campaign promoting the most backward conceptions about sexual relationships and democratic rights.

On February 23, a former friend and sexual partner of Alexie during his marriage, Litsa Dremousis, issued statements on a literary blog that opened the gates. At least ten women have announced that Alexie had harassed them. Dremousis took to twitter claiming, "Dozens of women have now contacted me or my colleagues [about] Sherman Alexie sexually harassing them, making unwanted advances, cornering them in rooms, and/or explicitly threatening to end their literary

careers if they told anyone.”

Since then, several women publicly shared their detailed stories with National Public Radio (NPR). Janine Walker, an author and poet herself, established a friendship with Alexie after meeting him at a literary event. With a lot of admiration for Alexie, Walker went on numerous casual dates with him, where they discussed her career among other topics. On one occasion, he tried to kiss her but stopped when she declined. “It just felt really wrong,” explained Walker.

Erika Wurth explained a similar situation in which she met Alexie as a young, aspiring author, and developed a relationship with him. After one of his readings in Colorado, she agreed to go with him to his hotel room. She did not feel very comfortable, and eventually told Alexie that she did not want to go further. He stopped, she left, and that was that.

NPR wrote: “In all, 10 women spoke to NPR about Alexie, who is a married man. Most of the women wanted to remain anonymous, but a clear pattern emerged: The women reported behavior ranging from inappropriate comments both in private and in public, to flirting that veered suddenly into sexual territory, unwanted sexual advances and consensual sexual relations that ended abruptly. The women said Alexie had traded on his literary celebrity to lure them into uncomfortable sexual situations.”

“Consensual sexual relations that ended abruptly,” or, in everyday language, breaking up with someone, or, more bluntly, dumping them. This fairly common occurrence is now semi-criminal and cause for disgrace. And he “is a married man.” Truly, the return of the *Scarlet Letter* ! A “serial dater” and an “adulterer”! What punishment is severe enough?

Even if the allegations are entirely true, there is no element of Alexie’s behavior that is criminal. Perhaps he made advances that female friends did not expect, came off too strongly or maintained relationships due to his sexual desires, but not once did he move beyond the realm of legality into forceful, nonconsensual or degrading acts. Whether he acted responsibly or not in his personal relations is no business of the snooping, censorious bloodhounds of the #MeToo movement.

Alexie responded to the allegations in a public letter, saying, “There are women telling the truth about my behavior and I have no recollection of physically or verbally threatening anybody or their careers. That

would be completely out of character. I have made poor decisions and I am working to become a healthier man who makes healthier decisions... I apologize to the people I have hurt. I am genuinely sorry.”

Other notable American authors have faced similar allegations in recent months, many of which emerged as anonymous postings in the comment section of a *School Library Journal* article. James Dashner, author of The Maze Runner series of novels, young adult dystopian science fiction, was dropped by his publisher, Penguin Random House, in mid-February. The author of the young adult book *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Jay Asher, was also cut by his agent at the same time.

Asher responded to the action, saying, “It’s very scary when you know people are just not going to believe you once you open your mouth. I feel very conflicted about it just because of what’s going on in the culture and who’s supposed to be believed and who’s not.”

In an essay titled “The Native Harvey Weinsteins,” Adrienne K. revealed the support for the #MeToo campaign by petty-bourgeois Native American scholars such as herself. The article equates the serious issues of sexual and domestic violence in Native communities with complicated, awkward and perhaps boorish actions of men in pursuing a relationship. Furthermore, she stated that even the “thoughtful, kind, truly respectful Indigenous men” are “complicit in the system”, calling upon all women to share their stories, and everyone else to listen, without criticism.

Native Americans make up one of the most oppressed and impoverished groupings in American society. They suffer from some of the highest rates of domestic violence, rape, homelessness, police violence, suicide and alcoholism. For the Native working class, and working class people across the world, no progressive outcome will arise from the #MeToo hysteria of the upper-class circles that cloaks its anti-democratic content behind the rhetoric of women’s empowerment.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>