

Robert L. Berner: Review of *The Summer of Black Widows*

In Sherman Alexie's title poem, black widow spiders, appearing on the Spokane reservation in miraculous numbers, become a metaphor for stories. The summer is full of spiders and thus rich in stories, and even after the spiders disappear, their evidence is found in every corner of a place that remains rich in poetic possibility.

The Summer of Black Widows includes some of the most powerful poems in our literature about the experience of living on an Indian reservation surrounded by the world its tribe has lost. Consider three examples: a poem about Spokane Falls, "That Place Where Ghosts of Salmon Jump," in which the loss of the salmon to urban and industrial concrete relates to women mourning for children who cannot return home; "The Exaggeration of Despair," a catalogue of horrific cases of social and cultural disintegration; and "The Powwow at the End of the World," a denunciation of crimes against the environment and against Alexie's tribe which succeeds as a poem even though those who attempt to do this kind of thing usually fail.

Alexie shows a variety of other strengths as well. He is, for one thing, a richly comic poet. . . . But as always in the greatest comic art, the humor that makes us laugh is always underlaid with a sad wisdom. . . .

In this, as always in the best American Indian writing, its relation to American culture as a whole is a primary subject; but Alexie also suggests that the influences are mutual, and in "Tourists" he suggests just why America needs Indian traditional tribal culture. One of the "tourists" is Marilyn Monroe, who, to become a person, something more than a beautiful piece of female flesh created by popular culture, comes to the reservation, where she is stripped by the women and led into a sweat lodge to become one with them, to be at last healed and made whole again, a person rather than a cultural artifact: "Finally, she is no more naked than anyone else."

In previous collections Alexie has earned an important position among American Indian poets, but the quality of almost all the poems in *The Summer of Black Widows* suggests that his significance now must be more broadly defined.

From Robert L. Berner, Review of *The Summer of Black Widows*. *World Literature Today* 71 (1997): 430-31.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Author:

Robert L. Berner [2]

Criticism Target:

Sherman Alexie

Item Reviewed:

The Summer of Black Widows [3]

Source URL: <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/content/robert-l-berner-review-summer-black-widows>

Links

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

[2] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/robert-l-berner>

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