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Flight review
By Julie Wheelwright
The Independent (2008)

Sherman Alexie, *Flight*, (Harvill Secker), £12.99, 181 pages, paperback

A fifteen year-old mixed race Indian-Irish pyromaniac on the verge of getting kicked out of yet another foster home counts the blemishes on his face. Echoing the opening of Melville's *Moby Dick*, he invites his reader to, 'Call me Zits'. But this isn't a quiet meditation on the impoverishment and injustice of Indians in American society. Novelist Sherman Alexie in his first novel for a decade has his narrator slamming straight into action over the breakfast table.

One of America's most celebrated Indian novelists (*Reservation Blues*, *Indian Killers*), Alexie draws on his own experiences of being raised 'poor and fragile' on the Spokane Reservation in Washington state to provide Zits with his poignant authenticity. Soon Zits has 'assaulted' his latest foster carers, landed in jail where he meets a pretty-boy anarchist named Justice and has plotted to rob a bank. The heist goes wrong and just as Zits realises that he's mown down a lobby full of bystanders, he blacks out and wakes up as an FBI agent tracking down Indian rebels on the Red River rez ('the asshole of America') in Idaho in 1975.

As FBI agent Hank, Zits witnesses a government-sponsored murder and realises a few of his heroes were traitors to their cause, then zips into a boy's body at the epic Battle of Little Big Horn in 1876. Then just at the point of moral indecision, he flies through time again to inhabit the soul of a white Indian tracker who goes native to save a child. As a pilot in the twenty-first century, he suffers remorse for teaching a terrorist to fly a plane and for a sexual infidelity. Every moment of reincarnation ends just at the moment when the person he inhabits must take a fateful course of action. As Zits says, 'We got blood on us all.'

Finally Zits resurfaces in a piss-soaked Seattle alleyway struggling with the most painful revelation of all. 'I stare at my bloody reflection. I am older than I used to be. I am battered, bruised and broken. But I know who I am. I am my father.' But through this final passage Sherman delivers the son from his father's sins and finally allows Zits to have a name.

The whirlwind tour through history and the bleak present for Indian and mixed race peoples in America (Zits describes himself as 'a blank sky, a human solar eclipse'), is leavened with humour and a staccato prose style. Alexie has an unerring ear for dialogue and the adolescent Zits stays the course, never over-burdened with information or ideology. The novel ends with a whimper rather than a bang -- Zits meditates on his chance to 'get unlonely' -- and while this might not be Alexie's best work, it's a powerful story well-worth reading.

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