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Alexie to give RMC Common Read lecture

BILLINGS, Feb. 14, 2014 – Remarkable and renowned author Sherman Alexie will give the 2014 Common Read Lecture at Rocky Mountain College this autumn.

The author of 24 books, Alexie will speak Thursday, October 23, after the RMC campus community has read and discussed his 2007 novel, The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian.

“I am exceptionally pleased to announce that Sherman Alexie has accepted our invitation,” said Stephen Germic, associate professor of English. “Alexie is one of the premier writers in America today… he is one of the premier writers in the world.”

Winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, the PEN/Malamud Award for Short Fiction, a PEN/Hemingway Citation for Best First Fiction, and the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature, Alexie is a poet, short story writer, novelist, and performer. In 2013 he published the 20th anniversary edition of his The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven. Smoke Signals, the film he wrote and co-produced, won the Audience Award and Filmmakers Trophy at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival. A Spokane/Coeur d’Alene Indian, Alexie grew up in Wellpinit, Wash., on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Joe Fassler in the Atlantic cited the “balance of plaintive lyricism and pained, wry humor” in Alexie’s “indispensable and versatile American voice.”

Alexie began writing in 1987, he said, when he read the first line of an Adrian C. Louis poem: “Oh, Uncle Adrian, I’m in the reservation of my mind.”

“I didn’t know Indians wrote books or poems…” he said to the Atlantic. “But as soon as I saw that poem, I knew I could write about myself – my emotional state, the narrative of my emotional life. When I wrote before, I was always wearing a mask – I always adopted a pose. I was always putting on a white guy mask. And all of a sudden, I could actually use my real face.”

Alexie uses sharp observation and humor in unity to comment on social mores. In November 2013 on Small Business Saturday, he organized more than 1,000 famous writers to each staff an independent bookstore for a day.

Publisher Little, Brown wrote, “Heartbreaking, funny, and beautifully written, The
Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, which is based on the author's own experiences, coupled with poignant drawings by acclaimed artist Ellen Forney, that reflect the character's art, chronicles the contemporary adolescence of one Native American boy as he attempts to break away from the life he was destined to live.”

The novel is taught is Billings Public Schools, where three parents objected in November 2013 to its inclusion in the curriculum. Billings media reported that at school district board meetings, students packed the room to explain the values and valid perspectives in the book.

One book each year receives analysis from all RMC freshmen as well as faculty and staff in the College’s Common Read program. The 2014 selection committee met often to consider 14 books nominated by the RMC community for the Common Read. The list was initially reviewed according to several criteria, including availability of the author, appropriateness for a wide audience, and disciplinary range.

The committee read and closely reviewed a "short list" of eight books and contacted authors’ agencies to establish availability for dates in the fall of 2014. “Topping our list of authors was Sherman Alexie,” said Germic. “Although it’s a quick read, the novel offers plenty of critical, literary, and social insights in its layered understanding, cultural commentary, eloquent format, and acceptance of the pain of finding one’s voice.”

Seven RMC faculty members combined with staff, students, and alumni to deliberate on the choice of the 2014 Common Read. The selection committee thanked Jacquee Dundas, associate professor of English and coordinator of freshman composition, who first suggested Alexie’s novel. The committee consisted of Dundas; Nick Plunkey, assistant professor of English and writing center director; Precious McKenzie, assistant professor of English; Andy Farkas, assistant professor of English; Matthew O’Gara, associate professor of political science; Emily Ward, assistant professor of geology; Carolyn Coefield, instructor of voice; Cara Lohrenz, director of student activities; student Maryrose Milkovich; and alumnus Kyle Pratt.

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