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Smoke Signals (Chris Eyre 1998)

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Until *Smoke Signals* (1998), none of the many excellent contemporary Native American writers had seen their work transformed into a feature film. Sherman Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian who grew up on a reservation in Washington State, adapted the script from his collection of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993). The movie is a uniquely Indian effort: Chris Eyre, a Cheyenne/Arapahoe filmmaker, directs.

This is a buddy movie—and sometimes a road movie—about two boys, Victor and Thomas, who journey from their reservation ("the rez") in the Northwest to Arizona to collect the ashes of Victor's father, who had long ago abandoned his family.

The title—a reference to the use of smoke by Plains Indians to send messages over distances—also refers to the house fire which orphaned Thomas, saved as a baby by Victor's father. The smoke symbolizes among other things the difficulties of communication between father and son, and the mystery surrounding the fire.

The film touches on many of the chronic reservation problems; alcoholism, poverty, broken families, and the dark historical shadows of Native American destruction at the hands of whites. What distinguishes the film, however, is its ever-present humor, which undercuts the solemnity of the larger issues and gives the Indian characters both authenticity and individuality. Thomas is a bespectacled nerd and budding writer, who often bores his fellow Indian adolescents with the stories he composes and recites about them. Victor, an angry young man, makes fun of Thomas because he does not fit Victor's image of the silent, macho Indian brave. Even white movies about Indians come in for ridicule; the tribe are fishermen by nature, and Thomas observes that Dancing With Salmon does not quite have the heroic sound of *Dances With Wolves*.

The comic sparkle of the movie is established right from the start. The traumatic fire is caused by Indians celebrating the Fourth of July; the Indians celebrate it not as the Independence Day of their white oppressors, but simply another opportunity to get drunk and shoot off fireworks. The announcer for the reservation radio station sits in his truck at an empty crossroads, reports that nothing is happening, and prounounces that "It's a good day to be indigenous." Two teen-age girls drive a beat-up car that can only go backwards.

The boys' trip to Arizona is also a journey through their childhood memories of Victor's father, and child versions of Victor and Thomas play out the history of

their friendship and their problems as fatherless sons. The trip becomes a poignant memorial to the tormented father, as well as a tribute to the Indian mothers and grandmothers who dispense love and fry-bread and keep the boys' lives together. What guards against self pity in the movie is the Indians' nimble wit and their sharp sense of humor, which is directed at themselves as well as white culture.

The comic quality of Alexie's fiction transfers well from page to screen. His eye and ear for the absurd occasionally suggest the style of a writer like Kurt Vonnegut, but Alexie is a Native American original. The success of the movie is due not only to its authenticity, but to the game, irreverent spirit of its author and his gallery of off-beat reservation characters.