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Author Sherman Alexie finishes state tour at Baltimore Book Festival

Alexie's coming-of-age hit is 2011 'One Maryland One Book' pick

By Steve Kilar, The Baltimore Sun

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The sound of hundreds of people laughing uproariously at the Baltimore Book Festival on advertisement Saturday afternoon was elicited not by a stand-up comic but by an author whose most popular work has been frequently challenged and banned in recent years.

Sherman Alexie discussed that book, "The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian," with a standing-room-only audience during the weekend-long literary celebration. The music- and food-infused event, in its 16th year, featured dozens of tents of authors and book sellers. Other popular authors, including Terry McMillan, Laura Lippman and Roland S. Martin, were also present for this year's festivities, which will conclude Sunday.

Baltimore's festival was Alexie's last stop on a three-day tour of the state organized by the Maryland Humanities Council's One Maryland One Book program. He also spoke in Cumberland, Frederick and the northern suburbs of Washington, D.C. Alexie's narrative is the fourth selection for the program, part of a nationwide effort to get communities reading and talking about a single work of literature.

"I was shocked," Alexie said of finding out that his work had been selected for the yearlong, statewide reading project. "And since I've been here [in Maryland] no one has told me how evil I am," he said, referring to those who have challenged his book's appropriateness for schools and libraries.

Much of the story, a National Book Award winner in 2007, deals with growing up in poverty, an issue that affects an increasing number of youths in Maryland as the economy continues to drag. Federal statistics last week showed that nearly 40 percent of people younger than 18 in Baltimore were living in poverty.

Alexie's book is about an American Indian boy growing up on the Spokane Indian Reservation who wants to be a cartoonist. Recognizing the failings of the reservation's school, he leaves to attend a high school filled with white students who have never interacted with a Native American.

"They literally ... thought I was going to pull out a bow and arrow," Alexie told the crowd. The book is semi-autobiographical. He called it "auto-fiction," a term he heard coined by a student when he spoke Wednesday at Goucher College.

The tale has universal appeal, said Andrea D. Lewis, the One Maryland One Book coordinator. The book's central character faces challenges that affect many people, regardless of race or ethnicity, she said.

It is largely about "overcoming opposition" and learning to work through problems, she said. The fact that the 2010 census put American Indians at only 1 percent of Maryland's population was not a consideration when Alexie's coming-of-age novel was selected.

"Poverty doesn't just happen on an Indian reservation," Lewis said. "Bullying doesn't just happen there. Poor education systems affect a lot of people growing up."

The One Maryland One Book selection is chosen each year by a committee assembled by the Maryland Humanities Council, Lewis said. There are a few practical limitations when books are proposed, she said. For instance, books need to be available in paperback, less than 400 pages long and appeal to a diverse set of readers.

The varied crowd at Alexie's talk demonstrated broad interest in the book and raised hope among organizers that the program was working to get Marylanders, especially young people, talking about difficult social issues.

Siblings Jasmine and N'Faly Kouyate, ages 13 and 11, wanted to attend Alexie's talk because they are both reading the book for fun. Their family makes the book festival an annual event.

"It's a funny book, and it was recommended by a lot of people," said Jasmine, who hopes lots of her friends read the book so they can talk about it. "It's kind of cool because it's written by a Native American; that's not that common" in books for youths, she said.

Barbara and Michael Hettleman waited in line after Alexie's talk to have him sign a book for their son, a high school English teacher in California. He teaches the book and sent his parents a copy so they could have a shared experience from afar.

"It's about dealing with relationships, opportunity, angst," said Michael Hettleman. "It can relate to all ages and all different kinds of people."

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