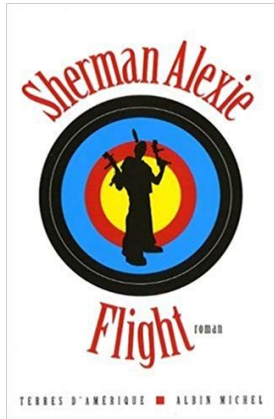
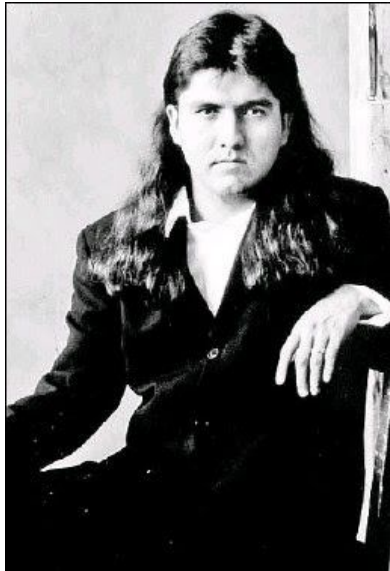


# Author looks at mystery of violence, youth

Melanee Murray For The Calgary Herald



**Author Sherman Alexie is the writer of the film *Smoke Signals*.  
(Black Cat, \$16.50, 208 pages)**



## **Flight By Sherman Alexie**

The image of a gun-toting, mass -murdering adolescent has ascended to the level of archetype in modern culture, and may, in the not-so-distant future, make the scent of gun powder synonymous with bad skin, growth spurts and other hazards of puberty.

In his novel *Flight*, Sherman Alexie puts this archetype in an appropriately mythical context, in an attempt to unravel our world's unremitting violence.

The novel centres on a young man who goes by the moniker "Zits," so named for the 47 pimples (he has counted them) on his face. Zits is of Native American and Irish descent, an

orphan who has lived in a total of 18 foster homes. He escapes a juvenile detention centre with an unusual partner in crime — a mysterious white teenager by the name of Justice.

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has lived in a total of 18 foster homes. He escapes a juvenile detention centre with an unusual partner in crime — a mysterious white teenager by the name of Justice.

The combined effect of Justice's detailed knowledge of wrongs against Native Americans and his open, brotherly affection for the oft-rejected Zits is intoxicating.

Almost in a dreamlike state, the protagonist finds himself armed with loaded guns in a bank in downtown Seattle. At the moment when he is about to shoot, Zits involuntarily embarks upon a metaphysical and symbolic journey; he is ricocheted through the psyches and bodies of an assortment of males locked in life-and-death struggles, violence being the most compelling option.

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What is even more metaphysical and symbolic than Zits' quest, is the timing of the novel's release; just a few weeks after the Virginia Tech shootings. Alexie's book, despite its comic touch and ultimate vision of hope, underscores humanity's current existential tragedy; at any time, we, as world citizens, may find ourselves reeling from another senseless attack, be it domestic or international, from our own hands or at the hands of others — to another.

As Zits inhabits the lives of people whom he both reveres and despises, Alexie makes a compassionate link between homicidal or genocidal acts and people who want what we all want — love, success and retribution for loss and grief. The author takes the classic victim/ hero — both a child and Native American — and empowers him to feel and act from an identification with his "enemies" that transcends a natural instinct for revenge.

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Nevertheless, *Flight* is an imaginative, intriguing attempt to get to the heart of darkness — our enduring impulse toward violent acts.

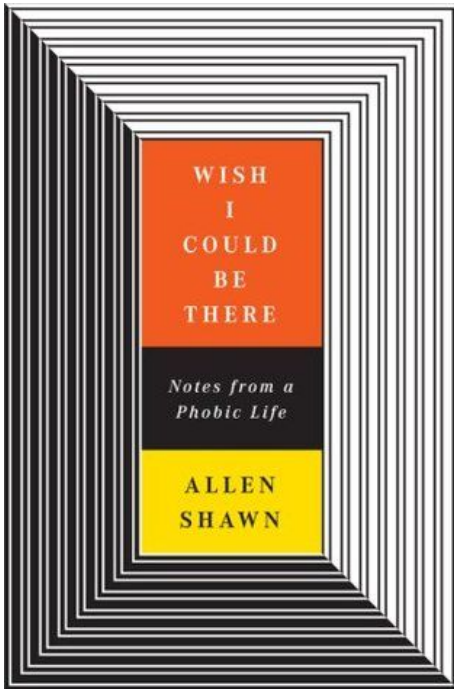
MELANEE MURRAY IS A CALGARY- BASED  
WRITER AND ACTOR AND A FREQUENT  
CONTRIBUTOR TO BOOKS & THE ARTS.

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# Unmasking the birth of phobias

- Calgary Herald

- 25 Feb 2007
- MELANEE MURRAY FOR THE CALGARY HERALD
- 



**REVIEW Wish I Could Be There: Notes From A Phobic Life by AllenShawn (Viking, 288 pages, \$31)**

A personal account of a phobic's world can suggest a sensational, voyeuristic peek into the freak show of human behaviour. It's a topic tailor-made for the daytime talk shows and weepy autobiographies. But AllenShawn's memoir, *Wish I Could Be There*, is instead a quietly moving rumination on his own agoraphobia, and couldn't be further from such

spectacle.

In the course of Shawn's book, it is clear that he is reaching out to all of us, and that the phobic response to life is not much removed from the neurosis, emotional handicaps and regret over missed opportunities that plague us all. Shawn presents an encompassing look at phobias — defined as excessive or irrational fears — and weaves in facets of biology, neuroscience, psychology, literature and art as well as his own personal history. His father, William Shawn, was the legendary editor of the *New Yorker* magazine and his brother

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Allen Shawn is possessed with as much writerly acumen as his kin, moving gracefully from the biological components of his malady to a Freudian take on the matter. Rather than a dry run-down of stats and data, the scientific exploration of phobias offers a fascinating perspective on the mechanism that has allowed humans so much evolutionary success — fear.

However, it is when the author gets personal that it is revealed how his family life growing up may have been the root of his issues. One family secret was that Shawn's autistic sister Mary was sent away to an institution. Shawn's love for Mary and her abrupt removal is presented as nothing less than heartbreaking.

Without tumult or grief, he shows that catharsis was unavailable to him or his urbane, witty, well-managed family. His thoughtful prose chips away at a pain that only his body — panicked as it courses in a car over an unfamiliar road years later in Vermont — seems willing to register.

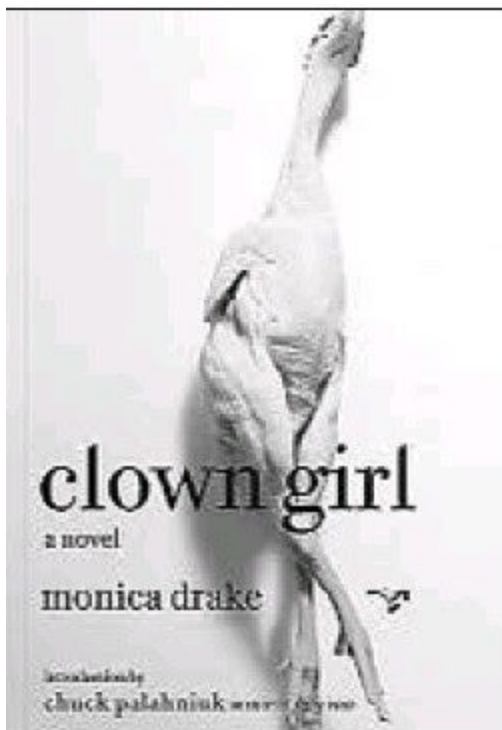
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that only his body — panicked as it courses in a car over an unfamiliar road years later in Vermont — seems willing to register.

Still, without the saccharin promise of full recovery, Shawn begins to align the fragmented parts of himself. While he often cannot “be there” he brings us, quite artfully, to him.

# Please, don't send in these clowns

- Calgary Herald
- 25 Mar 2007
- MELANEE MURRAY FOR THE CALGARY HERALD



Picture this: Academy Awards 2008; the surprise winners for best song in a movie perform their hit single, *It's Hard Out Here for a Clown*. Thugs in white makeup and big shoes flood the stage, juggling, pratfalling and miming their rage. The silhouette of a female appears, revealing a skimpy dress and the voluptuous cleavage of her big, red nose.

In case you haven't heard, clowns are hot. And not only are they hot, but they exist as a subculture of outsiders subject to exploitation of all manner — especially the sexual sort.

At least that's the case in Monica Drake's *Clown Girl*, the story of a young woman named Nita, who lives and nearly dies by the rules of the *Clown Handbook*. The novel starts out amusingly enough, as Nita, a.k.a Sniffles, quotes from her favourite clown trick manual, *Balloon Tying for Christ*.

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As odd as it all sounds, Nita is even odder. Intent on adhering to the strict rules of the *Clown Handbook*, she refuses to speak to doctors when she is in dire need of medical help. And when she isn't eking out a meagre living in her chosen profession, Nita single-mindedly dreams of her emotionally and physically distant boyfriend, Rex Galore, the testosterone-rich alpha male of all clowns. Not that this fashionista of the Barnum & Bailey set has to worry about male attention: Coulrophiles (clown lovers) abound, soliciting her for any number of fetishistic pastimes, including clown stripping and clown prostitution.

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But the promising note of weirdness in *Clown Girl* devolves into repetitive shtick. Drake seems to think that reiterating terms like “dead parents,” “coulrophobe” and “coulrophile” is a substitute for creating an inner life for her protagonist. A great writer — even a merely good one — can evoke a reader’s identification with the strangest of characters.

The art of clowning as practised by Nita seems masochistic, rendering her choices not only misguided, but downright dumb. She spends much of the book injuring herself in gag falls gone awry and eliciting the unwanted interest of her knight in shining armour, a Steve McQueen-esque cop named Jerrod. Description after painful description of this accident-prone clown gets tedious.

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Her prolonged obliviousness ends up making this novel — the would-be successor to Katherine Dunn’s wonderful *Geek Love* — more like garden variety chick lit.

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