My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys
Sherman Alexie

1. In the reservation textbooks, we learned Indians were invented in 1492 by a crazy mixed-blood named Columbus. Immediately after class dismissal, the Indian children traded in those American stories and songs for a pair of tribal shoes. These boots are made for walking, babe, and that’s just what they’ll do. One of these days these boots are gonna walk all over you.

2. Did you know that in 1492 every Indian instantly became an extra in the Great American Western? But wait, I never wondered what happened to Randolph Scott or Tom Mix. The Lone Ranger was never in my vocabulary. On the reservation, when we played Indians and cowboys, all of us little Skins fought on the same side against the cowboys in our minds. We never lost.

3. Indians never lost their West, so how come I walk into the supermarket and find a dozen cowboy books telling How The West Was Won? Curious, I travel to the world’s largest shopping mall, find the Lost and Found department. “Excuse me,” I say. “I seem to have lost the West. Has anyone turned it in?” The clerk tells me I can find it in the Sears Home Entertainment Department, blasting away on fifty televisions.

4. On Saturday morning television, the cowboy has fifty bullets in his six-shooter; he never needs to reload. It’s just one more miracle for this country’s heroes.

5. My heroes have never been cowboys; my heroes carry guns in their minds.

6. Win their hearts and minds and we win the war. Can you hear that song echo across history? If you give the Indian a cup of coffee with six cubes of sugar, he’ll be your servant. If you give the Indian a cigarette and a book of matches, he’ll be your friend. If you give the Indian a can of commodities, he’ll be your lover. He’ll hold you tight in his arms, cowboy and two-step you outside.

7. Outside, it’s cold and a confused snow falls in May. I’m watching some western on TBS, colorized, but the story remains the same. Three cowboys string telegraph wire across the plains until they are confronted by the entire Sioux nation. The cowboys, 19th century geniuses, talk the Indians into touching the wire, holding it in their hands and mouths. After a dozen or so have hold of the wire, the cowboys crank the portable generator and electrocute some of the Indians with a European flame and chase the rest of them away, bareback and burned. All these years later, the message tapped across my skin remains the same.
8. It’s the same old story whispered on the television in every HUD house on the reservation. It’s 500 years of that same screaming song, translated from the American.

9. Lester Falls Apart found the American dream in a game of Russian Roulette: one bullet and five empty chambers. “It’s Manifest Destiny,” Lester said just before he pulled the trigger five times quick. “I missed,” Lester said just before he reloaded the pistol: one empty chamber and five bullets. “Maybe we should call this Reservation Roulett,” Lester said just before he pulled the trigger once at his temple and five more times as he pointed the pistol toward the sky.

10. Looking up into the night sky, I asked my brother what he thought God looked like and he said “God probably looks like John Wayne.”

11. We’ve all killed John Wayne more than once. When we burned the ant pile in our backyard, my brother and I imagined those ants were some cavalry or another. When Brian, that insane Indian boy from across the street, suffocated neighborhood dogs and stuffed their bodies into the reservation high school basement, he must have imagined those dogs were cowboys, come back to break another treaty.

12. Every frame of the black and white western is a treaty; every scene in this elaborate serial is a promise. But what about the reservation home movies? What about the reservation heroes? I remember this: Down near Bull’s Pasture, Eugene stood on the pavement with a gallon of tequila under his arm. I watched in the rearview mirror as he raised his arm to wave goodbye and dropped the bottle, glass and dreams of the weekend shattered. After all these years, that moment is still the saddest of my whole life.

13. Your whole life can be changed by the smallest pain.

14. Pain is never added to pain. It multiplies. Arthur, here we are again, you and I, fancydancing through the geometric progression of our dreams. Twenty years ago, we never believed we’d lose. Twenty years ago, television was our way of finding heroes and spirit animals. Twenty years ago, we never knew we’d spend the rest of our lives in the reservation of our minds, never knew we’d stand outside the gates of the Spokane Indian Reservation without a key to let ourselves back inside. From a distance, that familiar song. Is it country and western? Is it the sound of hearts breaking? Every song remains the same here in America, this country of the Big Sky and Manifest Destiny, this country of John Wayne and broken treaties. Arthur, I have no words which can save our lives, no words approaching forgiveness, no words flashed across the screen at the reservation drive-in, no words promising either of us top billing. Extras, Arthur, we’re all extras.
A rodeo rider decides to quit his line of work after a serious injury, but when he visits his family and finds out that his dad is not well, he'll have to risk it one more time. Director: Stuart Rosenberg. Share this Rating. Title: My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys (1991). 6.3/10. Want to share IMDb's rating on your own site? Use the HTML below. You must be a registered user to use the IMDb rating plugin. Login. Show HTML View more styles.