

Suzanne Kamata
Tokushima University

The Summer of The Black Widows by Sherman Alexie

I'd like to introduce *The Summer of The Black Widows* by American author Sherman Alexie. I chose this book more because of the author than the content. I think Alexie's work, in general, is well-suited to Japanese students. His style is clear and accessible. He writes in a variety of forms, from six-word stories to screenplays. He has written and won major awards for novels for both adults and young adults. He has also written many short stories of various lengths, and made a movie, "Smoke Signals," based on one of his short story collections. In addition to his accessibility, his work brings up a number of social issues. He's a Native American who grew up poor on a reservation, and his background figures into much, if not all, of his work. His subject matter is serious, but he has a great sense of humor which is evident in his work.

As an example of this book's accessibility, his poem "Totem Sonnets" is basically a series of lists. As a whole, these lists create a kind of self-portrait of the artist. I have had students make similar autobiographical list poems. Even those with the most minimal English ability can manage to create a list poem.

Another activity that seemed to work quite well with this book was the writing of cento poems. To prepare students for this activity, I gave them the definition of a cento, which is a poem in which each line comes from another poem. They can be lines of poems by the same poet, or different poets. I also told them that they had to cite the exact source of each line. They were required to list the name of each poet and the name of each poem following the cento. I brought along poetry books from my personal collection, but students were also allowed to access poems on the Internet. As a variation, you could have them write poems in class and use each other's poems to create centos. Because my students are often inclined to do only the minimum required amount of work, I gave them a line limit. In one class, they had to write at least 5 lines. In another, I made them write 10.

Frankly, I expected many of them to write the first five lines they came across in order to finish quickly, but they actually became quite engaged in this activity. They chose their source

material deliberately and lingered over the books. A couple of students stayed in the classroom past the bell. Some students became engrossed in reading entire poems, and spontaneously shared them with classmates. The poems that they produced in class had thematic unity and narrative progression. I found that this was a good exercise in skimming, in citing, and in reading comprehension. As a bonus, students were exposed to contemporary American poetry.