To be honest, I can’t fully appreciate or understand the point of most of the references, since most of the people, events, and cultural symbols referenced are not really familiar to me. I will try my best to express what I think of and get from these stories, and try to grasp the author’s intention.

The story that I found both particularly interesting and somewhat disturbing and confusing is “the approximate size of my favorite tumor”. A major theme of this story is humor. The narrator, James Many Horses, likes to make jokes, even when he is dying. He made Norma, his wife, laugh when they first met in the tavern, and he also made her angry with his jokes in his last days. Most of the references are used in the jokes as well. Although the author repeatedly depicts how hard people laugh at the jokes, these seemingly funny situations seem to have deeper meaning, and often the humor is associated with pain and loss. The title of the story itself is already quite unordinary. To use “favorite” to describe a tumor could hardly be understood as humor. The same with most of the jokes in this story, I can barely laugh at them and they appear to me rather disturbing.

One important reference in this story is baseball. When James was diagnosed with terminal cancer, he told Norma “the doctor showed me my X-rays and my favorite tumor was just about the size of a baseball, shaped like one, too. Even had stitch marks. … I told her to call me Babe Ruth. Or Roger Maris. Maybe even Hank Aaron ’cause there must have been

about 755 damn tumors inside me.” Baseball seems to be a very popular sport in the US, and I assume most of the targeted readers can relate to the reference. Such reference, together with other similar references, like basketball and popular culture, could possibly help the readers relate more to the characters, and echo with their situations and emotions. In contrast, many other stories and novels we have read, I think, put the native Americans on a somewhat alien place to (most) non native US readers. The places, lifestyles, beliefs, and many other details, I suppose, are not familiar to many readers. I assume most readers would potentially create a we-versus-them kind of situation, and could not fully engage themselves in the stories.

James Many Horses also said “I was going to Cooperstown and sit right down in the lobby of the Hall of Fame. Make myself a new exhibit, you know? Pin my X-rays to my chest and point out the tumors. What a dedicated baseball fan! What a sacrifice for the national pastime!” This creates a more complicated meaning to the baseball reference. “Sacrifice” to the “national” pastime, when understood together with the marginalized status of native Americans in the US and their traumatized history with the white people, gives me a very complex sense of irony and some other feelings I don’t know how to express. James was diagnosed with terminal cancer and he basically could do nothing about it, so he chose to make fun of it. I can’t tell if such humor is a sincere positive regard to life, or a resigned escape from a desperate situation, or both, or an even more complex combination. The same with the Indian humor in general. “Humor was an antiseptic that cleaned the deepest of personal wounds”.

As I mentioned earlier, the references create a sense of familiarity. Meanwhile, many of the same references simultaneously create a sense of we-versus-them confrontation. For example, “sacrifice for the national pastime” would (I think) potentially remind the readers of the Indian identity of the characters, and the deep meaning associated with such identity. Another example is the superman reference, which I found the most interesting and disturbing. “’Jesus,’ I said to my attending physician. ‘A few more zaps and I’ll be Superman.’ ‘Really?’ the doctor said. ‘I never realized that Clark Kent was a Spokane Indian.’” When I read this, I almost laughed out at “… I’ll be Superman”. Superman is such a simple but powerful cultural symbol that almost everyone can relate to. Then when I saw the next line, I felt sick and dizzy. Then when I saw “And we laughed”, I wanted to tear the book to pieces. This would be a perfect joke to demonstrate the character’s optimism, if the character were not a Spokane Indian. It seems to me that Indians almost lost the right to tell jokes; the jokes don’t belong to them; the jokes are not theirs; they are white man’s jokes. But they still laughed, “you know, sometimes that’s all two people have in common”. It’s like they have to laugh; they can only laugh.

There are also many references to Indian stereotypes. For example, when James first met Norma in the tavern, he and Raymond were joking: “‘What tribe you think she is?’ Raymond asked me. ‘Amazon,’ I said. ‘Their reservation down by Santa Fe, enit?’” Another example is the story told by Raymond: when James heard ten Indians were killed in a car wreck, “‘Ten Skins?’ I asked Lester, and he said, ‘Yeah, ten’. And then Jimmy starts up singing, ‘One little, two little, three little Indians, four little, five little, six little Indians, seven little, eight little, nine little Indians, ten little Indian boys.’” These self-deprecating humors can be seen in other stories too.

The author’s attitude toward humor is also complicated. On the one hand, it’s sometimes truly the key to the problem. At the beginning of the patrolman story, the narrator says “still, you have to realize that laughter saved Norma and me from pain, too.” Confrontation with police and conflict with the juridical system seem to be a constant theme of Indian stories and novels. In reality, conflicts between police and civilians, especially those of minority groups, are indeed a serious social issue. In the story, James and Norma used their humor to more or less defeat the patrolman. This symbolizes the humor, as a weapon, to fight against the unfairness and injustice imposed upon Indians by the white society. Sometimes, humor provides a useful escape from reality – James won the heart of Norma with his strong sense of humor in the first place. On the other hand, throughout the story, Norma holds a negative attitude towards James’s jokes about his terminal cancer, and, indeed, some pain and loss could not be compensated or resolved through humor. For example, when James heard that Norma’s mother died, he tried to make a joke either to comfort Norma, or to hide his own anxiety. Norma responded by saying “Stop. It’s not funny.” “But I didn't stop, then or now.” Norma eventually returned to James, “and we laughed.” My understanding is that humor is the last and only resort Indians can turn to, to escape the painful, brutal and hopeless reality. It doesn’t solve the problem, but they have no other choice.