

Native American Writers of the Plains

After the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890, the Indian Wars of the Great Plains came to an end, and so do most stories about Indians. Movies like *Dances with Wolves* and *Geronimo* end with bedraggled Indians riding into the sunset. But what really happened to them?

In this series, four Native American novelists update the stories of tribes that continue to live in their home territories. The literature of the Great Plains includes the land east of the Rockies, from central Canada south through Oklahoma. Two of the novels cover the Blackfoot Indians of Alberta and the related American band, the Blackfeet of Montana. Chippewa of North Dakota are represented, and finally the Osage of Oklahoma.

Contemporary Native American writers first gained national attention when N. Scott Momaday won the Pulitzer Prize for *House Made of Dawn* in 1969. Since then, writers from many tribes have told their stories through popular novels. James Welch, Louise Erdrich, Linda Hogan, and many other Native Americans have won literary awards for their work. Canadian Thomas King is a relative newcomer to the field, with two published novels.

Native American writers all describe the struggle to maintain ancient traditions despite the melange of cultures around them. The values of family, clan, and community are compromised by a non-Indian, capitalist economy. How can a tribal individual and family sustain inner integrity amidst pluralism and commercialism? These are the conflicts that face every American. In these Native American novels, family history is set within the context of tribal history. The extended families, clans, and tribes all have intricate interactions with the characters. These are historical novels in the best sense, great love stories, and stories about identity in the post-modern era. Also, look for that famous survival trick of Indian humor--impossible to define, but unmistakable.

Fools Crow

by James Welch

Welch, of Blackfeet, Irish, and Gros Ventre descent, says he wrote this novel to explain Blackfeet culture to critics who were confused by his first two novels. The book follows a boy through the last days of traditional life, to the smallpox epidemic that ends the old Blackfeet way of life. Visions and dreams are expected to be a part of the boy's personal power. Until he has an inner awakening, he cannot be accepted as an adult. Success finally comes for *Fools Crow* as a fighter, a hunter, and a husband. Along the way, Welch shows the difference between Indian and non-Indian beliefs.

Mean Spirit**by Linda Hogan**

Hogan, a Chickasaw from Oklahoma, researched her novel to include historical characters like John Stink, who revived himself after burial and became a living ghost in his community. Hogan fictionalizes the story of a rich and beautiful Osage heiress, Nola Blanket, who is courted for her oil rights. The disturbing tale is based on the practice of unscrupulous non-Indian men who married for money and then murdered their brides. Hogan's book is also rich with details of daily life in the 1920s.

The Bingo Palace**by Louise Erdrich**

The Bingo Palace is the last of the four novels that began with *Love Medicine*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award. Erdrich, of Chippewa descent, began her career as a poet and continues to be an eloquent stylist. Readers will enjoy this book for its language as well as its story. The backdrop for the narrative is legalized gambling on a reservation that resembles the Chippewa reservation at Turtle Mountain in North Dakota. The expose of the gambling industry is a timely one. But always look for another level of reality with Erdrich. Lipsha Morrissey, the hero, is visited by the spirit of his dead mother, June. Through her posthumous gift, he finally has luck in love--with the beautiful Shawnee Ray--and luck with money, at the casino. The slapstick humor makes this novel one of Erdrich's best.

Medicine River**by Thomas King**

In Alberta, the Blackfoot tribe has a rule that a woman must marry within the tribe in order to live on the reservation. Will, a photographer, never knew his white father, but nevertheless grew up estranged from his mother's tribe. Her funeral finally brings him back to Medicine River, a reservation border town. He finds himself settling in Medicine River to discover his own past, as well as to enjoy the camaraderie of a new Blackfoot friend, Harlen. King, a Canadian of Cherokee descent, describes the humorous escapades of the reservation basketball team and the town's ritualized social life through Will's observant eyes.

Suggested Reading

Bruchac, Joseph, ed. *Survival This Way: Interviews with American Indian Poets*. Greenfield Center, N.Y.: Greenfield Review Press, 1987.

Coltelli, Laura, ed. *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990.

Erdrich, Louise. *Baptism of Desire*. New York: Harper & Row, 1989.

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Hogan, Linda. *Savings*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1988.

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King, Thomas. *Green Grass, Running Water*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993.

Welch, James. *The Indian Lawyer*. New York: Norton, 1990.

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Wild, Peter. *James Welch*. Boise, Ida.: Boise State Western Writers Series, 1983.

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