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JAMES WELCH

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James Welch: I am from Missoula, Montana, and I'm really, really thrilled to be here in Tucson. It's been a warm winter up there, but it's certainly nothing compared to down here, so it's a great pleasure to get down, and I'm very pleased to be in the class.

I'm from Montana originally. I was born in Browning on the Blackfeet Reservation, and lived there part of my growing-up years, and on the Fort Belnap Reservation, which is a couple of hundred miles from there. I'm Blackfeet on my father's side and Gros Ventre on my mother's side. A little bit of Cherokee on my father's side and Irish from both sides (laugh), so I've got quite a mixture in me. But I mainly write about the Blackfeet Indians, although my first two novels, Winter in the Blood and The Death of Jim Loney, were set on the Fort Belnap Reservation. The Indians there are the Gros Ventre and the Assiniboin Indians. I think of myself as Blackfeet. I'm enrolled up at Browning. We had a ranch on the Fort Belnap Reservation, and so those places mean a lot to me. I write about them kind of interchangeably, which probably sounds a little strange since they're both in Northern Montana, but to me they're two distinct reservations, distinct groups of people. I have different relations with them all. They are different groups to me.

Fools Crow was the first I wrote about the Blackfeet.

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It was a historical novel set in the late 1860s to 1870. Those of you who've read it know that was a very pivotal time for the Blackfeet. It was a time of encroachment by the white people. There were some young Blackfeet people who were creating problems for the settlers, the miners, virtually everybody around Montana. So in 1869 the government decided to strike them. General Sheridan told Major Baker, who was stationed at Sun River, a post there, that he wanted the Blackfeet struck, and he wanted them struck hard. So they marched north from that point in thirty below weather. It was towards the end of January. They wiped out a band of Blackfeet, but it was the wrong band. They were supposed to have been after Mountain Chief's band, and they struck Heavy Runner's band. Heavy Runner was a peace chief. That created all kinds of problems. They killed 173 people, and during that winter the Blackfeet were suffering from small pox, an epidemic. So between those two events, the Massacre on the Marias, it's called, and the smallpox epidemic, The Blackfeet became probably the first group of Indians on the northern plains to lay down their arms. When Lewis and Clark came through that country they called the Blackfeet the most ferocious group of Indians that they had met. They were glad to get out of their country. So the Blackfeet went from that in 1803 to the first group to lay down their arms against the

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white people.

I've always considered the Blackfeet experience a very tragic experience. It just seemed natural to write about it. I'm focusing on Fools Crow because the historical aspect of it is very interesting. It has to do with a group of people who encompassed all human experience, you know. They weren't particularly noble Indians. They weren't particularly bad Indians. They were human beings. That's really what I wanted to get across, the idea that historical Indians were human beings. They weren't clichés. I hope that in that book I deal with all kinds of human experience, in addition to these big dramatic events that happened to them as a people.

The Indian Lawyer is just the opposite type of book. It's very contemporary about an Indian person who goes off the reservation. He's very successful. All through his life he's been successful. Now he's in the majority culture. Put an Indian person into that culture and see how he functions. See if he can make the adjustments necessary. See how people look at him. See what he thinks about the people back on the reservation where he came from. With each novel I've tried to do something that shows a different aspect of northern plains Indian culture.

My latest two projects were co-writing a documentary movie on The Battle of the Little Big Horn, Custer's Last

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Stand. It's going to be shown on PBS in October as part of the American Experience series. We had it called "The Last Stand" all through the writing. Now they want to call it "Custer at the Little Big Horn," I think, because they think people won't get it if you don't spell it out entirely. But, at any rate, it was a fun project to work on. I hope that we brought something to that event. It's the most-depicted military event in American history. And it may be the most depicted historical event in American history. Over a thousand paintings and lithographs, over forty movies, and the books--you couldn't count them, there's been so many. It's just this little tiny event out there on the western plains, but yet it was significant to both Indian people and white people.

What we tried to do was to tell the history that led up to it, the pushing of railroads across the country, the Black Hills controversy, all kinds of events that led up to this particular event. Then the aftermath, the immediate aftermath. The Indians were on reservations within a year of that event. So it was a great victory for the Sioux and Cheyenne, and some Arapaho people were there. But it was also the end, and they knew it at the time. We tried to tell the battle from the point of view of the Indians. Most Indian accounts have been dismissed because they seem to have been contradictory. But what we've discovered is the

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village was like three miles long, and so any given Indian account would be talking about a different part of the encounter. So if you can link all of those events together you come out with a very consistent interpretation of what happened that day. That's what we tried to do in this movie, for the first time tell at least the battle part from the Indian point of view.

I'm writing a book on the same subject now. We had all this research, and my editor suggested that I write a book. So I'm trying to write this book also from the Indian point of view.

Larry Evers: Where you were in the village made a big difference to how you perceived the events.

James Welch: Yes, exactly.

Larry Evers: How are you thinking about handling that in a novel form? Would that involve different points of view?

James Welch: Well this book will be nonfiction. You know, we had to do the historical thing for the documentary movie, but for the book I want also to do contemporary things, like the woman who is the superintendent there is the first American Indian woman to be a superintendent of any type of monument in this country. It's quite ironic and appropriate that she's the superintendent where Custer got wiped out. You think about it, it's ironic on the one hand and entirely appropriate on the other. I've talked to her several times.

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I'd like to use her as a touchstone for what went on there. The trading post across the street is run by a man named Put, who doesn't know the difference between good art and bad art. He has just awful trinkets in there, and he had some really good things. I'd like to do something on him and that trading post and what the significance is. But the historical always has to underlie. It'll be the theme.

Every spring they do something for the anniversary of the event. It happened on June 25th, 1876. My wife and I were there this past June. Because the Columbus year was coming up this year, some Indian people wanted to do something to commemorate that monument, where now there has been a name change. It went from Custer Battlefield National Monument to Little Big Horn National Monument. Also there will be a monument actually put up to the Indian people who fought and died there. So finally there'll be some kind of equality. Well, some Indian people wanted to commemorate that, and so they marched on the monument. We had dinner, several of us including the superintendent, and the film makers, with Russell Means about two months before the anniversary. He told us among other things that there were only 200 Indians there. He wanted to make it a fair fight. He likes to employ a little exaggeration to make his point. He told us that 200 Indian people were going to ride onto the site, ride their horses, and do a reenactment of

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their own. He was going to do this reenactment. So at dinner he was saying things to try to outrage us because he thought we were just another film crew who was going to come there and take away something, and distort and exaggerate and so on. Once he found out that we had other plans, then everything worked out just fine. He never did show up for the actual demonstration that day, but a lot of Indian people did. They danced, they drummed, and Barbara the superintendent actually danced with them. That was quite a significant event in trying to make this all come together.

Larry Evers: Sounds like a fascinating project.

Jim Welch: It is. Yeah.

Linda Bolton: I read an interview that you did last year in the Bloomsbury Review. You talked about language, that in some ways poetry is a language that's maybe closer to the experience of American Indian people. I'd like to ask if you would speak about what it meant for you when you made the transition to working with the novel. Are there ways in which you feel that to represent the experience of Indian people in the novel transforms or changes that form?

James Welch: Aha! Well, the transition was really strange because I wrote very short lyrical poems dealing with the imagery of the landscape and of the people in the landscape, and so on. I had no idea about how to write a novel, so I wrote Winter in the Blood, which was my first one. I

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thought I was doing a pretty good job. I wrote this draft and showed it to a friend of mine, Bill Kittridge, and he just went through it with a fine tooth comb. Every single page was marked up. Too dense, the dialogue is too wooden, and so on. These are the practical things I'm talking about now. I thought well, maybe I can't write fiction. So I put it away and didn't even think about it for several months. Then I pulled it out of the drawer again and realized that he was right three-fourths of the time. There were things I could do to correct these problems. And so then what I finally came out with in the final version of Winter in the Blood was a novel that's very spare. Not much happens in it. There's no big plot line. It's just this impressionistic, picaresque journey that this guy has through the Reservation and towns and all that. But the language, I think, was very evocative. I think it did reflect a poetic background. I think my second one, The Death of Jim Loney, also did. It was with Fools Crow that I finally started to get out into larger storytelling, more of a plot, more issues involved. So it's been a gradual transition period.

In some ways poetry I think is closer to the language of Indian people. But in other ways maybe short stories or novels are closer to the storytelling tradition of Indian peoples. First of all, you know obviously the poetry that

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Indian people write now, the fiction that they write now, are in Western European traditional forms. Those are the forms you have to work in in order to communicate. You have to use the English language whether you were raised a traditional Indian or not. You have to put all of this Indian experience into these other forms. Personally I wasn't raised a traditional Indian, although I was raised on a couple of reservations, went to a lot of ceremonies, and when I was younger I was learning to speak the language the way kids learn. But then we moved from the Blackfeet Reservation down to the Fort Belnap Reservation, so I lost my Blackfeet. What I'm saying is that Indians come in all stripes of experience with traditions. It's necessary that they all write in these Western forms in order to make the experience immediate and accessible, not only to other Indian groups, but to the society at large.

Linda Bolton: I just finished Fools Crow yesterday, in fact, and the whole time that I was reading it I felt that there was some quality which I don't know how to name in that novel. Something made it feel like a different kind of novel even though, in some respects, it belongs to those traditional western forms. I felt that you were doing something with the form that made it different.

James Welch: I was trying something different there. I decided just to let it all hang out, you know. To forget

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about those western forms as much as possible, and maybe even think more in terms of the Latin American forms, what they call "magical realism" and so on. You probably know more about that than I do. I have read some of that work and what I think is good about it is the freedom of presenting a different type of reality. To them it's their reality. Historical Indians and a lot of contemporary Indians have a different sense of reality than say mainstream Americans, whoever they are. The mainstream sense of reality, I think, is that everybody knows what's real, and everybody knows what's unreal, what is surreal, and so on. We all seem to have the same notion of what is real. When I was dealing in that novel, I just thought, "well, sure, animals can talk. Sure, dreams are incredibly significant and can guide your life, and so on." When I was writing, I was there. It was the most interesting writing experience that I have ever had because it was the hardest thing to get into. I'd sit there, and I'd sit there for two or three or four hours and nothing much would be happening. It uses a gradual transition. First I could maybe write a paragraph, or maybe not even that. And the further I got into it the more I could work in that world. Finally this world became unreal, you know, because as a writer you're working alone anyway. When you're working alone, you're right there. But this was not only right here in my

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writer's world, but this was a whole different world, and it was a great experience. I found myself appreciating things more, things that I would see, things that I would hear. I found myself looking up at the stars more. Unfortunately it didn't last. But during that writing experience it was great.

Jean Armstrong: I'd like to follow up on that question. In view of what you were just saying about how you're representing a reality, are your novels a sort of ethnography?

James Welch: I was brought up as a writer. I've been writing for thirty years, I guess, and as a writer I don't think in terms of ethnography, historical theory, or things like that. If I'm writing fiction what I'm trying to do is tell a story first. That's important because without a story you really don't have anything. But secondarily, I'm trying to explore the psychology of people. In The Indian Lawyer, I'm trying to explore the psychology of this particular man, Sylvester Yellow Calf, and of other people, for example, Lena Old Horn, the guidance counselor. These are individual stories. They all come together in many ways, but they are individual stories. Each person has a different psychological makeup, different things happened during the course of their lifetimes to create them in the way that they are at any given moment. I'm more interested

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in the psychology of the characters, how they interact, how outside forces act upon them, how they react to those outside forces, and how I can tell a story that encompasses these particular points. So things like ethnography and so on are really kind of secondary. Sylvester Yellow Calf definitely has to be a Blackfeet Indian. In this particular story he definitely has to be raised by his grandparents. His parents have to be the way they are to have cut him loose at a very early age. And his grandparents have to be the way they are to take him on. That constitutes his familiar background. And then, he's a good student in school for some strange reason, and he's a terrific athlete for an obvious reason. He's got the physical abilities. But he's always had a kind of ambition. But the thing that mitigates this kind of ambition is a sense of guilt. The further he gets away from his people, the more successful he gets, the more he knows that doors have been open for him. He's one of the good Indians, and he keeps getting passed along. Consequently, he keeps thinking of the people that he left behind.

Jean Armstrong: I'd like to try that question again in a different light. What you said in response to Linda's question was that you were trying to represent a different reality--a reality in which dreams can be guides or animals can speak and so forth. That is not ethnography in a

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traditional sense, but is showing how somebody can be shaped by their culture to have a different ideal of reality. I see that more in The Death of Jim Loney and how he's torn between different realities than in The Indian Lawyer where he has some intuitions that he's not able to recognize and realize because they're contradicted by the mainstream reality.

James Welch: Yes. As I said earlier, I've tried to do something different in each book, so it's hard to pin down. Maybe there's a direction that these books have taken. But I think each one has been different. I've tried to explore something different in Fools Crow. I let it all hang out and just went with that other reality. You know, we talk about myths. What if the myths are real? They are real to the people whose stories these are. So what I did was just say "Okay, this is real." The Indian Lawyer is the more rational kind of mainstream reality. I'm just exploring different areas.

Larry Evers: I was going to pick up where you had taken us with Sylvester Yellow Calf as you were talking your way into the novel. There comes a point, it's when he's on the steps with all those kids, the steps of the home, and he's got the Indian leaders there, when suddenly he realizes that by getting that far out and away from them he's in the curious position of representing them again in a way that he hadn't

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imagined before. It is a reversal. He realizes that he's not an opportunist after all, but he's here for a reason. That was a moment that worked really well for me in the novel, and it made me wonder about the burden of the Indian writer, if I can link his experience as a lawyer and politician to your experience as a writer. Have you ever stood on the steps like that and suddenly felt that by virtue of your position you have a chance to do something in this way for your people?

James Welch: Well, I guess. First of all I hope that I have good strong Indian readership. I know I do from the places I've gone. I've always had a very good response from Indian people. They have felt that these were true situations, these could have happened, they weren't distorted, and so on. I remember when Winter in the Blood came out, that's the first one that I had a good strong readership, people said, "Yeah, this happened. This was the way it was on our reservation." Or, "Yeah, a town like Harlan exists off virtually every reservation in the country." So Indian people could identify with that experience. I think they could continue to identify with what happened in these other books.

I've always felt that Indian people were looking over my shoulder making sure that I get it right. That's exactly the way I've always felt during each book. I felt that if

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they feel that I'm getting it right, and I am getting it right, maybe it will be of interest and maybe influential to younger Indian people. Certainly more and more Indian people are writing now. Twenty years ago that wouldn't have been even considered a remote possibility for ninety-five percent of Indian kids.

Larry Evers: You were talking about the experience of ordering books for a course in American Indian Literature that you taught fifteen or twenty years ago, you had a hard time of it.

James Welch: Yes.

Larry Evers: Not now.

James Welch: No, not at all. In fact, it's just the opposite. Yes, just in the last fifteen years. We're in an Indian renaissance. It started with Scott Momaday's book House Made of Dawn, which was published in '69, I think. So it's been going on for a little over 20 years now, and during that time Indian writing has just blossomed. It's fantastic. Within the last ten years white critics, arbiters of taste, and so on have discovered that Indian writing stacks up with any writing done in this country. That's quite an achievement. In ten years this has happened, I think. I just think that we're in this period where you can write about what you want, and people will read it. They won't say "well, that's pretty good for an

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Indian writing," you know.

Larry Evers: But I'd take this back to Sylvester, again. He's standing on the steps, and he says, "My past successes only gave me an opportunity." And at that point, the end of the narrative, there is this tremendous burden on him, too, right? Do you feel any sense of burden as a writer, having enjoyed these successes, and now in this wonderful period where there are all these openings, is there another side, too?

James Welch: Not so much anymore. I think the burdens have all been lifted in terms of numbers. I think the burden really was during the seventies, the early seventies when AIM was very active. Activism was almost a moral imperative. If you believed in these things, you should be out there. You should be manning the barricades and so on. A writer isn't really an activist except through the work. So back in those days there was a lot of pressure on writers. And of course there were fewer Indian writers back in those days to be more active. So you'd feel kind of guilty saying, "Well, I'm letting my writing speak for me and for Indian people." You know, the response was "bullshit! If you're not on the barricades, you're not anything." That was a very pressure filled time. Now it's a piece of cake.

Deirdre O'Malley: Do you think there are things in the

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Indian experience, or the reservation experience, that lend themselves to what you call the renaissance?

James Welch: Well, I think Indian people have always wanted to express their culture, to make people understand what their culture is all about, to try to eliminate a lot of the clichés about Indian people. Of course when I talk about Indians, I need to say that each tribal group is different. I think a person writing about the Blackfeet doesn't speak for the Gros Ventre, the Assiniboin, the Sioux, the Crow, or the Arapaho. They only speak for the Blackfeet. If you're a member of one of these other tribal groups, you would like for your people to be understood. You'd like to write for your own people, but for the larger culture as well. And so I think that the renaissance happened because more and more people were realizing that they wanted to continue telling the stories of their people, their traditions, so that other people could understand what it was all about. Indian people feel that they would like their stories told accurately. I don't know how many young people have come up to me and said, "I want to write too," just for the reasons that I am telling you about. That's pretty amazing.

Chad Galts: In spite of there being a lot of different tribal groups, do you think your books speak to larger Indian readership? What do you think is in your books that transcends those differences?

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James Welch: Well, even though each tribal group is different, I think there are some common experiences that Indian people share. As I said before, most Indian people still live on reservations, although the urban Indians are getting more and more numerous. When you write about a reservation experience, I think people on other reservations can appreciate that because the same issues are common to lots of reservation Indians. And some are the bad issues, you know, the alcoholism, the divided families, and so on. These are things that Indians can experience in common. A lot of the good things are the traditional types of things, the cultural things that celebrate Indian life. Every Indian group has a celebration, you know, which is a very religious celebration. You have to do it absolutely correctly or else you'll pay for it that year. I think a lot of those things are held in common by different tribal groups. I mentioned that town. Every reservation that ever I've known has a "town" like Harlan, Montana. I wrote a poem about it. It's a town where they take your money. It's dependent upon the reservation. That's the only reason for its existence. Once they get your money, then you're no good to them until you get some more money. They're very prejudicial against tribal people. I think every Indian person has experienced a town like this. There are similarities like that.

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Chad Galts: Are those things that you think about in the composition of your novels or are they things that work their way into the book?

James Welch: Well, I think both. Sometimes they just work their way into the books. Other times I think, "I'm going to deal with something here." But I've really discovered that if you just write a story, just tell a story about Indian experience, you touch on so many issues that are important to Indian people. It's just the way it is. There are issues and situations that they can identify with. So, I think the Indians in Oklahoma or Arizona or even the Onondaga Indians in New York can identify with certain aspects of a book written about Montana Indians.

Kathleen Donovan: I'd like to return to what you said earlier about your interest in exploring the psychology of your characters. In Jim Loney and The Indian Lawyer a part of the psychology of both protagonists is the absence of the mother. They are almost haunted by this absence. It is a gap in their lives. I started thinking about how prevalent that whole motif is in contemporary Native American writing, in House Made of Dawn. It's in Ceremony. There's a reversal in Almanac of the Dead where it's the child that's missing. It's in Love Medicine, you can make a list. It's in Mean Spirit. I think, in some ways, it always seems prevalent back to Cogewea. Why?

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James Welch: We all want to be raised in a "normal" family. A lot of Indian families were split. Boarding school affected Indian women. They didn't know how to parent, I mean, if they went to school from grade school through high school in a boarding school, they didn't know how to be a traditional parent. When they would have children, a lot of those children ended up with the grandparents. The grandparents raised them. In some ways this has almost become a tradition. You know, the grandparents certainly have a big role, but quite often the kids actually lived with the grandparents. And so the theme of these books is those kids who have been raised by the grandparents. They didn't really know their own parents. And of course a lot of social things could happen too. The father could be off drinking all the time, or could have split when the kid was very young. Or the mother could have done that too. So I think Indian writers try to get at that theme, to try to explain, not only to a general audience, but to themselves, why those things happen in Indian culture.

Another issue or theme of a lot of Indian literature is the idea of coming home: House Made of Dawn, Ceremony, or a novel by D'Arcy McNickle which was written in 1934, I think, called The Surrounded. In all of them a young man is coming home. It's the boarding school experience again. You know, you go off to the boarding school and you come home, and

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you're in the middle of two worlds. They've drummed the language out of you so you can't speak the language anymore, and yet you're not a real mainstream person. You're this thing caught in the middle.

I think many writers feel that way about themselves, you know, because most Indian writers aren't full blooded traditional Indians. They're usually mixed bloods, breeds. Many of them weren't raised in a traditional way, and so you find yourself--I include myself in that group--you find yourself on the edge looking in to the center of the culture. It's a great vantage point certainly for a writer. It gives you the distance necessary in order to write about that objectively enough. If you're too involved it's like you can't see the forest for the trees. You're too involved in the culture. I think a lot of writers feel like those boarding school kids, that they haven't participated fully in the culture. Helps them as a writer, but I think they always feel regretful as human beings. So that creates that theme of the outsider.

Louise Lockard: I think you have written about the prison. How does the prison become an extension of the boarding school for the Indian young men?

James Welch: The prison, yes, well, it certainly does. The Indian population in Montana is six or seven percent of the total population. The population in the prison is up to a

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quarter, you know, twenty-five percent Indian. I was on the parole board for ten years and paroled a lot of Indian people; denied a lot of parole to a lot of Indian people. Women, too. There's a women's prison there. I think, in a way, the prison becomes a haven for people. And the problem has been in the past that there haven't been effective treatment programs back on reservations or in any community. I think eighty percent of the inmates--Indian or white--were in the prison for either alcohol or drug related crimes. I think with Indian inmates that percentage was even higher. There should be a treatment program waiting for them back in their community, including the reservation. On most reservations there aren't intensive enough programs, in-house programs where a person has to go, spend up to six months in an in-house program, and then finally get weaned away from that program. So, these social problems just continue in the joint, and there doesn't seem to be a realistic way out, except for some who are really highly motivated to quit drinking and doing drugs. But now the communities themselves are taking up the slack. There's a new alcohol and drug awareness movement on reservations. It's incredible. They hold powwows, dry powwows, and it has to do a lot with Christianity, which to me is the down side, but, you know, whatever makes lives better I guess is good.

Sharon Suzuki: I want to ask about The Death of Jim Loney.

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It is a book that, for some reason, has really stayed with me for years and years. You have been quoted as saying that his death was a creative act.

James Welch: Well, it is a creative act, and consequently maybe even a positive act, because he orchestrates his own death. It almost starts immediately after killing his friend. He doesn't know whether it was an accident or not. As a matter of fact, somebody pointed out to me if he had known it was an accident, there would have been no need to write the book because that would have been the end of it. But he chooses to think that he might have killed that guy on purpose, and so from that point on, things like going to visit his father in his trailer, and leaving the car by the roadside, lots of things lead the authorities to him out in Mission Canyon. He knows that as a consequence of all these activities, he'll end up standing on that ledge. And the Indian cop who will kill him will be down there by this car with a gun, and he'll actually kill him. So it works out. It works perfectly. Yes, so that's why I think it was a creative act. It was an orchestrated kind of movement. He'd been in the malaise of his life. You know, it's just nowhere. All he does is sit at his kitchen table and drink wine. So for the first part of the book, that was his life. So by orchestrating his own death, he's taking action, he's turning in a positive direction by taking action. He almost

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commits suicide by proxy. He does the action that puts him in that situation.

Vicki Broach: I have a question related to that. I'm wondering where Sylvester Yellow Calf is at the end of Indian Lawyer. I've been thinking about the forces that bear on him as a character, and I see those as social and personal. The book ends by saying that he played basketball with the only man who ever beat him, which seems to weight it in terms of who he is personally. He makes a decision. It seems to me that in the novel when he makes the decision to get involved with Patty Ann and so quickly, that isn't very rational. There's a very self-destructive aspect to that, and he makes that choice. But on the other hand, he's also involved in this system which seems to be stacked against him. I was thinking a lot about the case that he makes his reputation on, where the woman slips in front of the Anaconda Company headquarters and breaks her hip. That seems to me a really complicated case because the liability isn't clear on the part of the company, and the result of the case is that she wins 1.8 million dollars, one third of which goes to his law firm. The Anaconda Company pulls out, presumably taking jobs away from the people in this community. And so I don't know if I see in Sylvester at this point an understanding that the very case that allows him to make his reputation and to be considered for

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politics, etc., is one that's pretty complicated, that hurt some people. I'm wondering if he sees that--if you see that in him--and where is he going to go after this? Is he still fighting with himself? Is he going to perceive the ways in which the system can undermine him? Where do you see him at the end?

Jim Welch: Well, I think he's troubled all the way through the book. Do you agree with that?

Vicki Broach: Yes.

James Welch: And the case that he's staked his reputation on is a pretty common case, you know. They tell you in the north to keep your sidewalks shoveled because if somebody slips on your sidewalk, they can sue you for everything you've got. That includes even the Anaconda Company. Didn't they have a mine down here in Arizona? Well, they closed this Butte operation and moved to South America almost entirely, because there people don't sue you for slipping on the sidewalk. So it was a complicated kind of social issue. But, Sylvester was a young lawyer, and he wasn't particularly a good person, I don't think. You know, I don't think he was a highly moral person. I think that he was trying to be that, maybe. He was trying to look at all of the issues involved in his life during the self examination that occurs during the course of the book. But especially when he was young he was just being pushed along.

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When he gets to join this prestigious law firm, what he wants to do is to win a big case. That's the way lawyers are. They aren't particularly principled people.

(Laughter.)

Vicki Broach: I should tell you I used to be a lawyer.

James Welch: You probably know better than I what I'm saying.

Vicki Broach: I do, I do!

James Welch: And so especially for a young lawyer to win a big case is to really solidify his position within a law firm, and so on. It might be appealing and attractive to that person to do this, and certainly it has no connection, as I think I pointed out in the book, with Anaconda leaving the State of Montana. They wanted cheaper labor, you know. Butte was playing out. So it was their decision to move. It didn't have anything to do with this case. The end of the book. It's funny, so many people have asked about the sequel. I thought it was done, you know. To me it was done! I was through with this character! But then people say, "What's he going to do now? Is he going to come back to this firm? Is he going to stay on the reservation and help those people? Is he going to do this or that?" So, you know, he seems to be reasonably happy working on that water rights case. And he says he'll see it through no matter how long it takes. It could take years. So, I don't

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know where he is at the end of that book. He seems reasonably content, but on the other hand he would have to make a decision about whether his sabbatical from the firm is going to become permanent. It's open-ended, I think, so what do you think?

Vicki Broach: I'm worried about this character: will he skirt disaster again? I mean, has he pulled back in a situation where he's safe? If he were to go ahead, has he learned something from this, I guess is what I wonder about him, because what led him into this situation where he's involved in a fairly unethical situation is still a question in my mind. I see at the end a change for him in some ways, but I also see him playing basketball against himself, and so, I agree that it's open-ended.

James Welch: Yes, I don't know what to say except that he's human. He could go either way. It's like Winter in the Blood, when, after all of his adventures, my main character is nameless in the book, he comes home, and he's standing there at the funeral of his grandmother, his last link with the traditional life, and he's thinking about going after the girl who stole his gun and electric razor. Again, only this time maybe ask her to marry him. Maybe buy her a couple of crème de menthes, you know, and so on. So, he's getting ready to go out there into the big world again, and who knows what's going to happen? I've always said Jim

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Loney wasn't going anywhere anymore but the other characters--Fools Crow--at the end of that book, what's going to happen to him personally? I mean, we know, because that was an historical book, basically what is going to happen to his people, but what is going to happen to him and to his family? You know, they've just had a baby. So in a sense I think that all books should be open-ended. You should wonder what is going to happen to these people. Any book that ends with happily ever after, or whatever, to me is kind of false book. It probably didn't even need to be written. But the kind of book where you develop characters where they do have futures, and their futures are undetermined at the end of that book. I mean you have a sense they're going in a particular direction, but you also have a doubt in your mind that maybe they won't.

Susan Stevens: When I read Winter in the Blood and I got to the last page, I felt really uplifted, because it seemed he was going to go somewhere and do something positive with the rest of his life. When he was out in the rain pulling on...

James Welch: Oh, the calf.

Susan Stevens: The calf, yes. In fact, I was taking a class at the University of Washington. Our teacher said that in that culture the people are late bloomers, they don't really find their focus in life until they're almost middle-aged.

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James Welch: Is that right? (Laughter.) Umm, I don't know. That's good. Who was this teacher?

Susan Stevens: It's true in our culture, I think.

James Welch: Which culture is that?

Susan Stevens: Tlingit. But I don't know if it's because we start out with such low self-esteem and we kind of build our strength as we get older.

James Welch: But maybe not in traditional culture, right? I mean, back in pre-white times, and so on.

Susan Stevens: I don't think so.

James Welch: So I think it does happen that way with a lot of Indian people that they are late bloomers because they have to overcome the system. They haven't scored points in the dominant society system, so there is a sense your self-worth isn't up there, and so on. So, yes, Indian people can be late bloomers. I know Indian women, I don't know how many Indian women I've run across in going around to different colleges, who have raised families or are in the process of raising families, and realizing that they have to take it upon themselves to go to school, to get educated, to get a job, to continue raising that family. This is another thing that's happening in Indian culture, a lot of women are taking over more of the roles that were traditionally male, and so a lot of males suffer this lack of self-esteem. Maybe the males are late bloomers as a result of this, if

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they bloom at all. Now I'm not saying that's for the good or the bad, it's just that it's different for a lot of Indian people.

Susan Stevens: Did you play basketball?

James Welch: Played it a little bit. I wasn't as good as those other people.

Linda Bolton: I wanted to pick up on Vicki's question a little bit to ask if you ever feel a sense of ambivalence within yourself about creating characters who are not necessarily, quote, "heroic," who, you know, exist in a human space, but when that work goes out into the public realm, do you ever feel an ambivalence about that, particularly in terms of the readership of non-Indian people?

James Welch: I never have, but I know exactly what you're talking about. I know both Winter in the Blood and The Death of Jim Loney had a lot to do with alcoholism, and I did have a few people, very few, Indian people say that that's not the type of person that they would want portrayed to the rest of society. And my response at that time was, "Well, alcoholism is an incredibly big problem with Indian people, and if you write a contemporary book that doesn't deal with that, you're probably not dealing with the reality of Indian existence. But I think I've modified my stand somewhat in my later years in that in those two books I

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think I focused too much on the down side of Indian life. And if I had it to do over I think I would--although maybe not. You know, I had stories to tell back in those days. But maybe I would try to balance it a little more with some of the more positive aspects of Indian life. Yes, so it's an issue, certainly, and a lot of people see writers as role models, and even that could be considered a betrayal by portraying these negative things.

Linda Bolton: Or as a spokesperson.

James Welch: Yes, a spokesperson, that's the other one.

Linda Bolton: Do you regard yourself as a spokesperson?

James Welch: No. No, and I mentioned something. I was raised to be a writer. That's exactly it. You know, I'm a writer who writes those books. When they're between covers, that's the end of those books. I never felt myself capable of speaking about Indian matters as a spokesperson. You know, I'm a writer. I mean, for instance, Vine DeLoria, I think is the perfect spokesperson. He has great opinions, and he doesn't hesitate to put them out there. I think he shakes up the outside society. And I think that's what makes a terrific spokesperson.

Susan Stevens: Did you learn a lot of storytelling from your own family, your parents, your grandparents and everything like that?

James Welch: Well, yes, I did. My great-grandmother was in

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that massacre on the Marias in Fools Crow. She lived with my father's family, and she was an old Indian woman at that time. She couldn't speak any English, but she could tell stories, all day long. My Dad and his brothers and sisters would listen to those stories, and then he told me the stories. I don't know if you remember but in the massacre Fools Crow comes upon a group of Indians that had escaped. They were old people and women and children, and one of them had been wounded in the leg. That's what happened to my great-grandmother. She'd been wounded in the leg but had managed to escape. That was really the impetus for writing that book. Because she had told so many stories, and the one about the massacre especially intrigued me, and so that was the seed, and then I did some research and so on to write the book.

Susan Stevens: Did it take longer to write that book than the other ones?

James Welch: No, no. It was kind of interesting because it had historical events, you know, they were like the sign posts along the trail. Then I could make up anything I wanted to go around these historical facts. And in some ways it was easier because the facts gave me the structure, and then I could invent and create as much as I wanted.

Ellen Winter: You said several times that you were raised to be a writer. I'd like you to elaborate on that. What

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made you think that you would be a writer? How did you come to it?

James Welch: Ah, well. I don't know, I just always liked writing. Even in high school I was doing quite a lot of writing, but it was very unschooled writing. It was like mushy poems to the cheerleader, poems about the seashore which I hadn't seen, you know, with wheeling gulls and all that stuff. Things I didn't know anything about. So it wasn't really until I got to college that I really learned how to be a writer. The things that you write about are the things that you know. But I always felt that I would be a writer.