

States of the Union

THE INDIAN IN FICTION

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

I HAVE JUST reread two interesting novels about American Indians, one recent, the other more than two decades old. You'll hear about them in a moment, after I've told you what happened one night on the road to St. Francis a few miles south of Rosebud, South Dakota, where the Brulé Sioux have their tribal headquarters.

It was years ago, when I occasionally visited Indian reservations as a housing consultant, but the memory is strong. I am driving a rented Mustang to a meeting in St. Francis at which I have been asked to speak. The road is so straight, flat and unfrequented that pilots of small aircraft regularly use it as a landing strip. This night, however, I have run into a traffic problem: An old rattletrap, minus both headlights and taillights, jounces slowly ahead of me, lurching from side to side in ways that discourage my passing.

The car is packed with passengers; I count nine heads by the beam of my lights. Suddenly, as I watch, a hand comes out of a back window and tosses a dark object

onto the road, directly in my path. I skid to a stop and jump out. Apparently they have thrown a dirty yellow blanket out the window—maybe to frighten me, I speculate absurdly.

I stoop to pick up the blanket. Did it move just then? Oh Lord, a baby! I am standing beneath a cold Dakota moon on the road to St. Francis holding in my arms a sleeping Sioux infant. Not a scratch on him (her?).

Now I hear the grinding of an old car. It is the rattletrap again, backing toward me in a series of wide, drunken parabolas. Before it has quite stopped a woman climbs out and runs toward me. She stretches out her arms. "Please," she says, "my baby."

I give her the baby. She explains that her husband is very drunk; he and the others have been drinking all week. That is why he threw the baby out the window. "I don't want to go with them," she says, "They will get us all killed."

I tell her I will take her and the baby to a priest in St. Francis. But first I walk to the other car and

stand near the driver's open window. I peer inside and feel the same intimations of heaviness that I get when I enter an Indian bar: Many hunched men in dark, bulky coats, sweating, boozing, muttering mysteries.

"I'm taking her and the baby to Father Fagan," I say into the darkness.

"Washtë," says a male voice. "That is good."

Now for the two novels—Dan Cushman's *Stay Away, Joe*, first published in 1953 and still selling briskly to schools, Elks Clubs, and Indians; and James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*, issued late last year. Both works concern Indians living on a Montana reservation. Welch, an Indian, writes like the early Camus: sad, gutsy, freighted with identity riddles. Cushman, a white man, is more like Steinbeck—poker-faced and parsimonious—and his book does for the Indian peasantry what *Tortilla Flat* does for the Chicanos. At its best it is comic without being condescending; at its worst it is sickly sentimental.

Stay Away, Joe recounts the mis-

adventures of one Indian family and its friends, a generally endearing assortment of knaves, thieves, drunks, and mountebanks. At the center of this raucous bunch squats Big Joe, the older son. He is a Korean War veteran, an occasional rodeo performer, an incurable braggart, and a liar. But most people seem to like him.

Big Joe is forever causing trouble. He steals his father's cows; he gets drunk and picks a fight with his sister's white fiancé; he smashes his new, unpaid-for Buick; he seduces another man's wife. Why is all this funny? Mainly, I suspect, for the same reason we can laugh at certain kinds of "sitcom" miseries on television: They have no real consequences. Nobody suffers very long or very deeply as a result of Joe's shenanigans, because that's all they are—shenanigans. And Joe himself remains alive and well in Indianland; like the baby tossed on the highway, he emerges without a scratch.

Cushman does not generalize; yet the implication of his novel is that Indians are good-natured lazy-bones who in some earthy way have solved the problems of existence. Unlike whites, Indians "really know how to live." It is an ideal theme for a white audience: We need not feel guilty about them because they are happy.

No wonder the book was an instant commercial success. Viking, the original publisher, sold 15,000 copies; then the Book-of-the-Month Club sold an additional 250,000. Two subsequent paperback editions accounted for another 1 million sales.

In 1964, Cushman bought all the rights and began selling his book through his own company in Great Falls, Montana, Stay Away Joe Publishers. "I still get a lot of orders from Indians," he told me in a recent telephone interview. "They say the book speaks the truth about them."

Maybe it does. Still, Cushman's

Indian readers may be too eager to see themselves as happy-go-lucky ne'er-do-wells. We know that in actual life Big Joe would either be in jail or dead—a victim of murder or suicide or an auto accident or a diseased liver or any of the other plagues that visit Indians more frequently than they do the rest of us. On the reservation, few infants survive the toss.

JAMES WELCH begins his brief, moving tale with a diagnosis of the Indian reality by the nameless narrator, who is trudging homeward from yet another drunken weekend in town: "Coming home to a mother and an old lady who was my grandmother. And the girl who was thought to be my wife. But she didn't really count. For that matter none of them counted; no one meant anything to me. . . . I felt no hatred, no love, no guilt, no conscience, nothing but a distance that had grown through the years."

He was not referring simply to the distance of the Montana landscape: ". . . the distance I felt came from within me. I was as distant from myself as a hawk from the moon." It was clearly an advanced

case of winter in the blood, the spiritual legacy of colonialism.

Home from his village carouse, our benumbed hero learns that his Cree girl friend has run off, taking his gun and his electric razor, which she will doubtless trade for drinks. "It doesn't matter," he says.

So the young man shrugs through his meager days, unfeeling if not entirely uncaring. And that is where a lesser writer might have left him, lurching in aimless debauch like that car on the road to St. Francis. But Welch has another agenda.

Toward the end of the book the narrator's grandmother dies, and soon afterward he happens to visit an ancient Indian who lives in a shack across the creek. There, as the two share a bottle of whiskey, he learns that this old man is his grandfather, the protector and lover of his grandmother many years ago when the Blackfeet were still fighting the white soldiers.

The news has an astonishing effect: "I began to laugh, at first quietly, with neither bitterness nor humor. It was the laughter of one who understands a moment in his life, of one who has been let in on the secret through luck and circumstance. . . ."

That is all we are told of the incident—except that later it moves him to think about going after the Cree girl. "Next time I'd do it right. Buy her a couple of crèmes de menthe, maybe offer to marry her on the spot!" It is not much of a plan but it may be the first one that has ever crossed his mind. Welch seems to be drawing a delicate connection between one's knowledge of the past and one's sense of the future—a gossamer tie between the old and the new, history and hope.

Again I see myself holding a baby beneath the Rosebud moon, and later peering squeamishly into the heavy, brimming Indian darkness. Welch's story has cast a little light on that troubling scene, and I am grateful. Washtë.

Next Issue

'Britain's
Growing
Identity
Crisis'

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'EuroVista'
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'Washington U.S.A.'
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Watching'
JOHN SIMON

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