

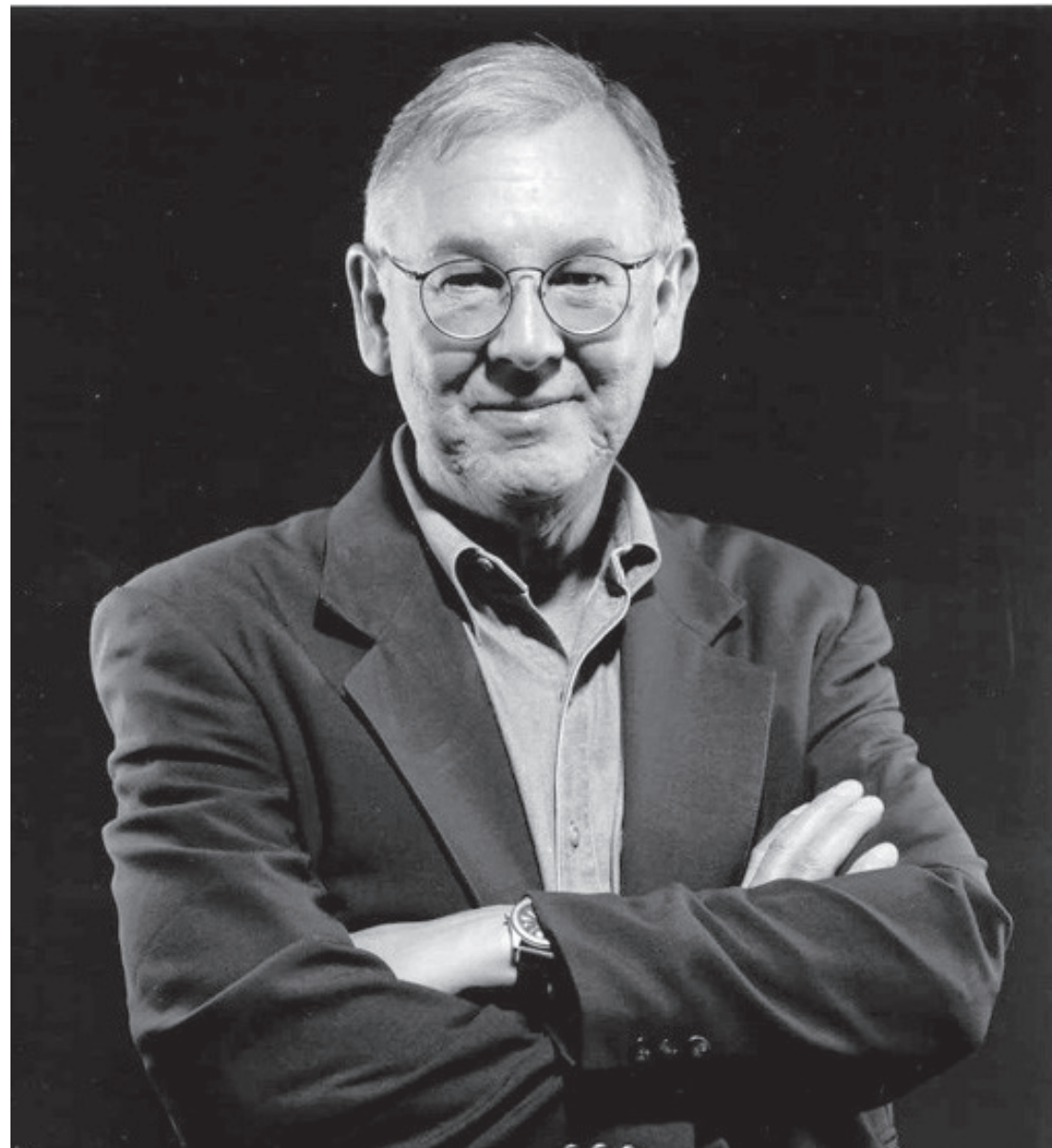
James Welch

(1940–2003)

Writer and Storyteller

“Indian writers might come from different eras, from different geographies, from different tribes, but we all have one thing in common: We are storytellers from a long way back. And we will be heard for generations to come.”

—James Welch



James Welch, 2001, photograph by Vincent Bourdon, image courtesy of Lois Welch

James Welch once admitted that as a young author he “*wrote blandly of sweeping mountains and wheeling seagulls over an ocean he’d never seen.*” Encouraged by his poetry professor Richard Hugo to “*write about the reservation, the landscape, the people,*” Welch began to write about that world: “*A world I knew deep down... a world full of bones and wind—the world of my ancestors.*”

James Phillip Welch Jr. was born in 1940, in Browning, Montana, to James Welch Sr., Blackfeet, and Rosella O’Bryan, A’aninin (Gros Ventre). The family lived on the Blackfeet and Fort Belknap Reservations, later moving to Minnesota and other states. Welch earned a bachelor’s degree in creative writing at the University of Montana, Missoula. In 1968, he married Lois Monk, a literature professor at the university.

Welch began writing poetry, publishing *Riding the Earthboy Forty: Poems* in 1971. Several novels followed: *Winter in the Blood* (1974), *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979), *Fools Crow* (1986), *The Indian Lawyer* (1990), and *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (2000). These works explore “*the American Indian’s search for identity in his native land,*” as Will Nixon wrote in *Publisher’s Weekly*.

In his historical novel *Fools Crow*, which follows the title character up to the 1870 Marias River Massacre, Welch offers his readers an intimate window into Blackfeet culture. Novelist and scholar Louis D. Owens writes that “*the most profound implication of this novel is that the culture, the world-view brought so completely to life in Fools Crow, is alive and accessible in the self-imagining of contemporary Blackfeet and other American Indians.*”

Throughout his life, Welch, who was also a teacher, historian, and film consultant, earned significant praise and international recognition. *Winter in the Blood* was described as “*a nearly flawless novel*” by *New York Times Book Review* writer Reynolds Price and as “*a masterpiece of comic fiction*” by Professor Alan Velie. *Fools Crow* earned the American Book Award and *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize. Welch’s honors include being named a Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French Minister of Culture and receiving the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers’ Circle of the Americas. His contributions to the documentary *Last Stand at Little Bighorn* earned an Emmy and a Spur Award.

Welch died in 2003 of a heart attack while battling lung cancer, leaving a rich body of work that depicts Montana Indian life from, as Welch said, “*the inside-out.*”