

Q&A with David Heska Wanbli Weiden, author of *WINTER COUNTS*

What is *Winter Counts* about, in your words? The book is the story of Virgil Wounded Horse, who's the local enforcer on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota. People come to him when they can't get justice from the US government or the tribal council. Sadly, this happens all too often, as Native American nations are not allowed to prosecute major felony crimes that are committed on their own lands. Instead, federal authorities have the sole authority to prosecute these crimes, but they decline at least half of these cases. This means that violent criminals are frequently released without punishment or sanctions. So, people hire Virgil to enact some street justice when this happens. But things get complicated when Virgil has to confront the sudden introduction of heroin on the reservation.

As the Ecco/HarperCollins catalog describes, "When justice is denied by the American legal system or the tribal council, Virgil is hired to deliver his own punishment, the kind that's hard to forget. But when heroin makes its way into the reservation and finds Virgil's own nephew, his vigilantism suddenly becomes personal. He enlists the help of his ex-girlfriend and sets out to learn where the drugs are coming from, and how to make them stop. *Winter Counts* is a tour-de-force of crime fiction, a bracingly honest look at a long-ignored part of American life, and a twisting, turning story that's as deeply rendered as it is thrilling."

What's the story behind the title? Winter counts is the calendar system historically used by the Lakota people; it uses pictographs rather than numbers. In the novel, Virgil remembers drawing winter counts as a child. And of course, the words also refer to the fact that winter can be a difficult season for Native people—and it certainly is for Virgil in the book.

What makes your book unique? *Winter Counts* is one of the first thrillers written by a Native American author. In general, Native writers have not written extensively in the crime fiction genre, although there are some notable exceptions. But I've always felt that crime fiction is a natural fit for American Indian writers, as we are quite familiar with the inequities in the criminal justice system. An example of this is the Major Crimes Act, the law passed by Congress that limits Native people from prosecuting certain felonies that occur on their own lands. Instead, U.S. federal authorities have the sole authority to prosecute these crimes, but they are declining a large number of these cases, even when the offender has been arrested. This means that these violent criminals are released from custody and are then free to re-offend. There are other laws that affect criminal justice on Indian reservations, but the Major Crimes Act is the most significant.

Do private vigilantes actually exist on Native American reservations? Yes, my character Virgil Wounded Horse is based upon real people, although I've naturally taken many dramatic liberties in the story. My hope is that readers will appreciate learning about the broken criminal justice system on reservations and the difficulties Native governments face in protecting their citizens. As just one tragic example, statistics show that Native American women living on reservations have an eighty percent chance of being sexually assaulted in their lifetimes.

Tell us something we won't find out just by reading the book jacket. Although the central conflict of the book involves drug dealers on the Rosebud reservation, the novel also deals with Virgil's struggle to come to terms with his Native American identity. From the HarperCollins catalog: "As Virgil starts to link the pieces together, he must face his own demons and reclaim his Native identity. He realizes that being a Native American in the twenty-first century comes at an incredible cost." This internal conflict is the theme of the book, and one that I hope readers will identify with and appreciate, no matter their own nationality. Finally, I want to note that the novel contains a (hidden) tribute to the Native writer Louis Owens and to one other writer. Some readers might catch my clues...

Are you from the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, which is the setting of your novel

WINTER COUNTS? No, I was raised in Denver, Colorado, in the Swansea/Elyria neighborhood, which has been noted as one of the most polluted and impoverished areas in the United States, and later in the suburb of Aurora. Because my mother was raised on the Rosebud Reservation, I spent a great deal of time there growing up, and I own three pieces of land there now, although that land is held in trust by the federal government (as is most Native land). I return there frequently to visit family and take part in Native spiritual ceremonies.

Are you involved in the national and Colorado Native American community? Yes. As the director of the Native American Studies program at Metropolitan State University of Denver, I've taught and mentored many Native students. I also served on the Board of Directors of the Denver Indian Family Resource Center for a number of years, providing legal and policy assistance for Native foster and adoptive children. I also visit local schools as a guest speaker, and I served as a mentor for the Young Authors Collective. I also work to support Native youth in South Dakota by providing free books and through the One Spirit program. I also served as a mentor for emerging indigenous writers through the Association of Writers and Writing Programs mentorship program.

Can you tell us about your children's book? Yes, I was very pleased to release *Spotted Tail* in 2019 through Reycraft Books. That book is for middle-grade students, and is the first children's biography of Chief Spotted Tail, the great leader of my nation. The book was illustrated by a Native artist, and the visuals are great! I don't receive any royalties for *Spotted Tail*—rather, I purchased a large number of copies, which I distributed at no charge to every elementary school on the Lakota reservations. I've heard from many Lakota parents and children, who've told me how much they appreciate the book.

What are you working on right now? The sequel to *Winter Counts*! Happily, there will be another Virgil Wounded Horse book from Ecco/HarperCollins, but I can't reveal any details of the story yet. The novel should appear in 2022.

What are your interests outside of writing and reading? I'm the father of two young sons, and they are the light of my life! Some of my novel was inspired by my boys, and I hope they'll enjoy reading the book when they're older.

Which authors inspire you? It's been said that we're in a new Native American Literature renaissance right now, and I hope that's true. Readers interested in other Native fiction writers should check out Brandon Hobson, Tommy Orange, Kelli Jo Ford, Stephen Graham Jones, and Erika T. Wurth.

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