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The Indian Lawyer

Cindy Linse

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The Indian Lawyer

by James Welch

W.W. Norton and Co., 1990

Reviewed by *Cindy Linse*

James Welch, author of *Winter in the Blood*, *The Death of Jim Loney*, and *Fools Crow*, has once again chosen a contemporary Native American loner, a "man without a country," to figure as protagonist in his latest novel, *The Indian Lawyer*. But unlike the protagonists of his other novels, Sylvester Yellow Calf (the Indian lawyer) doesn't seem to be doing battle with the ways of the whiteman's world; in fact, Yellow Calf, while not quite at home in the influential world of Helena law firms and power-broker's cocktail parties, moves at ease in these settings, perhaps with more ease than he moves through the world of the Blackfeet people at Browning. This former basketball star with a law degree from Stanford is coolly detached from his colleagues, the women in his life and the grandparents in Browning who raised him after his own parents abandoned him before he could even develop a clear memory of them.

At least this is the Yellow Calf we are shown in the beginning of the novel. But as things heat up, Sylvester Yellow Calf undergoes subtle changes, home-comings both spiritual and physical, and unexpected flashes of self-awareness.

Welch gives Yellow Calf a directly antithetical antagonist in the character of Jack Harwood, convicted felon and thief-for-the-thrill-of-it. Whereas Yellow Calf has risen from poverty and adversity, Harwood has fallen from every kind of advantage a white, middle-class upbringing has to offer. And Welch describes, both beautifully and believably, the worlds in which they operate. Harwood seems to have learned the ropes of prison life with as much ease as Yellow Calf has mastered the strings of white, male politics. But Welch quickly moves beyond these illusions to show that, whatever the environment, it is never quite under control. While Harwood gropes his way through the abysmal gloom of prison (coming before the parole board on which Yellow Calf

erves), he tumbles into trouble when he's refused parole and concocts a wild blackmail scheme that involves his wife, Patti Anne, as bait and a couple of ex-cons with ideas of their own. Meanwhile, Yellow Calf, blinded by the brilliance of a political bid for Congress fabricated for him by the Democratic candidate-maker, Mr. Fabares, stumbles and bumps into the trouble Harwood has strung across his path.

This might seem to be a pretty clear-cut, bad-guy v. good-guy situation. In James Welch's novel, things just aren't so. Yellow Calf isn't the kind of hero to ride into the fray on a gleaming white charger; Welch is honest about his protagonist's weaknesses and detachment. In the same way, Harwood isn't a standard Hollywood Black Hat, either. Welch imbues the convict with compassion and despair. And Welch, adept writer that he is, knows when to give the plot a good twist, when to throw in two more really "bad guys" to represent the evil of unpredictability. And, even though these two guys play a lot harder and faster than Harwood expected, we come to recognize, twist again, that they are as much the dupes of circumstance as Yellow Calf. We recognize them as victims because Welch has adroitly moved the battlefield from the forces of environment, through the forces of human opponents, to the final showdown within the self.

Throughout the novel, Yellow Calf has been warily circling himself, feinting and courting himself, testing his integrity as both man and Indian, and it is when he finally grapples and locks with himself that he not only discovers his humanity and the Indian heritage he can no longer afford to ignore, but he achieves a sort of triumph over all the circumstances that others have threaded through his life. It is in recapturing himself that Yellow Calf becomes the "new warrior" Lena Old Horn, his high school counselor and first love, had encouraged him to be.

Without giving away too much, I wondered why I found the ending so satisfactory; was I harboring some racist desire to withhold white power structures from Yellow Calf? I don't think so. No. I think what I find satisfying in Sylvester Yellow Calf's personal triumph is just the fact that it refuses to validate white power structures. Sylvester Yellow Calf may

not have won the brass ring held out to him by the white power-brokers, but he has won back something much more valuable: himself. As in previous novels by James Welch, it is the return to tribal values and traditional power structures that saves the contemporary Native American. And I guess I'm a little like Jack Harwood; my string-pulling power-plays in the whiteman's game always seem to get away from me. I like to dream that there are alternatives, ways to escape the whole tangled mess, and people like Yellow Calf who are brave and visionary enough to make the break. In this way, Yellow Calf is successful in *The Indian Lawyer*; he has counted coup on white power structures.