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Hugo -- teacher extraordinaire

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Dear Sir:

This is the second in a two part series dealing with Richard F. Hugo, associate professor of English at the University of Montana, Missoula.

The first story was about Hugo as a poet. This story deals with him as a teacher, with special emphasis on the success of one of his students, James P. Welch, a Blackfeet Indian who is soon to have his first volume of poetry published.

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HUGO--TEACHER EXTRAORDINAIRE

By Rebecca Lee Yates
UM Information Services

MISSOULA, Mont.---

"I teach on the theory that people do not know what they think like, love or hate, and writing a poem is a way of finding out."--Richard F. Hugo.

Perhaps nearly as important to Richard Hugo as his poetry is teaching at the University of Montana, Missoula, where he is an associate professor of English.

"I have never felt myself a part of anything until I came here," Hugo said. "I feel here like I'm part of a very good, very vital creative writing program."

The creative writing program at UM is under the direction of Earl Ganz, assistant professor of English.

"When I first came here in 1964," Hugo said, "11 persons were taking creative writing courses. Now more than 200 students are enrolled in the courses and we are getting applications from graduate students from all over the country."

Perhaps what sets Hugo off as a popular and revered teacher is his attention to and belief in the individual student.

"What I try to do," he said, "is imagine I wrote the poem myself, try to decide what happened inside the poet for the poem to go wrong. For a poet, the problem is always psychological, never literary."

more

"I think Hugo is probably one of the two or three best poetry writing teachers in the country," said James P. Welch, UM graduate student working towards his Master of Fine Arts degree.

Both analytical and suggestive, Hugo emphasizes writing and rewriting and "knows when to be tough to get the most out of a student," Welch said.

Credibility is given Welch's statements by the fact that the graduate student, after only three years of writing under Hugo's tutelage, soon will have his first book of poetry published by the World Publishing Co., the same firm which will issue Hugo's next poetry volume.

"I take a tremendous pride in Jim," Hugo said. "He has a remarkable capacity to learn very fast. I don't believe I've ever seen a poet learn so fast. I had been writing 12 years before I published a book.

"Jim has those qualities a poet has to have and cannot learn-- a tremendous gift for the sound of language, a good ear for hearing rhythms and tonalities," Hugo continued.

"He also is gifted with an imagination that permits him to exploit his private world poetically, to use it in the selfish way poets have to use it in order to write," he added.

The private world Hugo alluded to is "a world not accessible to other people, a world of Indian myths, folklore and desperate people."

Welch is a Blackfeet Indian, born on the Blackfeet Reservation at Browning, the son of Mr. and Mrs. James P. Welch, now of the Ft. Belknap Agency.

"There are no conscious sociological implications in my poems," Welch stated, but his poetry often does deal with Indians and their conditions, Indian past and the contrasting present, and the land of the Indians--what it was to them and what it means now.

At Browning there are 40 acres of land which, Welch said "we used to put into alfalfa. We called it the Earth Boy 40 after its original owner, Earth Boy." Hence the tentative title of his first book--"Riding the Earth Boy 40."

Using tight, imagistic language and a hard, steady rhythm, Welch usually writes about his birthplace. Although he has traveled and lived in several other states, "I have nothing to write about Minneapolis, or Alaska, or Washington," he said. "The country and people in Northern Montana are more interesting from the standpoint of a writer who is one of them by race.

"The land I write most about," he added, "is not mountainous; it's kind of stark plains, the sudden green of the Milk River Valley."

Now living in Missoula with his wife, Dr. Lois Monk Welch, UM assistant professor in English, Welch is at work on a novel about an Indian family on a reservation today. This very autobiographical novel, Welch said, may be his first and last.

"Arthur Wills said every one has his one good novel, and this one may be mine," he explained.

Welch previously has published poetry in "Poetry," "Poetry Northwest," "Choice," "New American Review," "Malahat Review", and has been anthologized in "Intro #1," Bantam Books, and "Young American Poets," Follett Publishing Co.

"Riding the Earth Boy 40" will be in the same poetry series as Hugo's book, "Good Luck in Cracked Italian," to be published this fall. Welch's book is tentatively scheduled for publication late this year.

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CHRISTMAS COMES TO MOCCASIN FLAT
by James Welch

Christmas comes like this: Wise men
unhurried, candles bought on credit (poor price
for calves), warriors face down in wine sleep.
Winds cheat to pull heat from smoke.

Friends sit in chinked cabins, stare out
plastic windows and wait for commodities.
Charley Blackbird, twenty miles from church
and bar, stabs his fire with flint.

When drunks drain radiators for love
or need, chiefs eat snow and talk of change,
and urge to laugh pounding their ribs.
Elk play games in high country.

Medicine Woman, clay pipe and twist tobacco,
calls each blizzard by name and predicts
five o'clock by spitting at her television.
Children lean into her breath to beg a story:

Something about honor and passion,
warriors back with meat and song,
a peculiar evening star, quick vision of birth.
Blackbird builds his fire. Outside, a quick thirty below.

(Reprinted from "Poetry Northwest,"
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