
David Heska Wanbli Weiden. *Winter Counts*. Ecco, 2020. 318 pp. ISBN: 9780062968944

<https://davidweiden.com>

Winter Counts by David Heska Wanbli Weiden (Sicangu Lakota) is nothing short of fantastic. With glowing praise from outlets like the *New York Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *USA Today*, the novel has caught the attention and won the hearts of the mainstream media. With the plethora of awards, nominations, and accolades it has garnered—such as being named one of the Best Books of the year by NPR, winning the Anthony Award for Best First Novel (Weiden being the first Native American author to do so), and winning the Spur Awards for Best Contemporary Novel and Best First Novel—*Winter Counts* has also gained esteem in the critical literary sphere. Furthermore, the book has a global presence; it has been translated into French and released in France under the title *Justice Indienne* and is being translated into multiple other languages. Finally, and unsurprisingly, *Winter Counts* has also been optioned for film production. The unanimous acclaim this novel has received could fill up this whole review; clearly, Weiden's debut novel is widely regarded as excellent. The plaudits *Winter Counts* has received are not only notable because it is Weiden's first novel, but also because it shows promise in the public's potential to pay more attention to Native American literature, and subsequently more attention to issues that impact Indian Country. Because *Winter Counts* does such an excellent job of simultaneously entertaining *and* informing its readers, this mystery novel is far more important than most of us realize.

Set on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota, the novel is told from the first-person perspective of Virgil Wounded Horse, the local vigilante-for-hire who is also the legal guardian of his late sister's fourteen-year-old son, Nathan. Virgil's profession springs from the absence of legal justice in Indian Country, a critical theme of the novel—a theme that also highlights Weiden's training in law. The opening scene depicts Virgil brutally beating up Guv Yellowhawk, the P.E. teacher at the local school who has been raping and assaulting his students. The school refuses to punish Guv because he comes from a prominent family; the tribal police are unable to do anything because the Feds prosecute all felonies committed on the reservation, and they typically refuse to investigate anything short of murder. The tangle of corrupt local politics and the jurisdictional nightmare that exists within Indian Country sit front and center right away.

The opening scene is also particularly interesting when analyzed within the context of the structure of the mystery genre. In many mystery, crime, detective, or thriller novels, the opening depicts a crime scene, a dead body, or a murder—something that relates to the greater puzzle that won't be pieced together until the very end. In *Winter Counts*, however, while the opening scene does depict a crime—Virgil beating up Guv—Guv Yellowhawk plays little to no role in the remainder of the book. Rather than being an oblique reference to the novel's main crime, the opening scene of *Winter Counts* serves a larger purpose. It introduces the reader to Virgil as well as operates as a metaphor for the atrocities that plague Indian Country today. Guv Yellowhawk is just one tiny example. The scene represents both the internal contemporary problems and the jurisdictional issues that stem from centuries of unabated settler colonialism. Indian Country is a place in which a P.E. teacher rapes minors, and people in official positions of power are either unwilling or unable to do anything about it. In this world, Virgil is a necessity.

The opening scene is also a good example of how Weiden takes a no-holds-barred approach when it comes to this novel. A Native man is raping and assaulting Native children and is not being stopped by the tribal school, while the Feds also look the other way. A Native vigilante is tasked with beating up the rapist. Virgil shares numerous other tragic anecdotes throughout: a man beating up his five-months-pregnant girlfriend so badly that she has a miscarriage and later kills her own cat and commits suicide; a two-year-old left in his car seat over a brutal winter night freezing to death; a man forcing his young niece into sexual activities; tribal council members embezzling money meant to be used to feed the community. There are no rose-colored glasses to be found here. No sugarcoating. I imagine some readers may take issue with these details and argue that Weiden's portrayal of life on Rosebud is too bleak, that the number of Native people portrayed as criminals is damaging, and that the novel doesn't do enough to blame settlers. I can see how some readers may have these critiques, but Weiden aims to portray both the good and the bad of life on the Rosebud reservation. Furthermore, Weiden underscores the past's role in creating these conditions, and the novel's core focus on criminal behavior and the subsequent lack of justice makes a strong call to action regarding serious reform of Federal Indian Law.

As an additional rebuttal to those who may take issue with Weiden's depictions, it doesn't appear that Weiden is interested in playing any sort of games with stereotypes—or negative. Part of what makes this book such a joy to read is the compilation of characters that populate this storyworld. They are deeply rendered,

complex, distinct, and simultaneously flawed and admirable – Virgil included. The cast of characters Weiden creates conveys both the difficulties and the pleasures of life on the Rosebud reservation. Another example is Virgil’s buddy, Tommy: an ex-con who reads Vine Deloria Jr., drinks quite a bit, becomes a cook at the tribe’s casino restaurant, and eventually finds romance toward the end of the novel. Tommy doesn’t play any vital role in the crime or the investigation, but as a person in Virgil’s life, the reader learns much about Tommy—which seems like a pretty smart move for future books in the series.

Another important theme embedded in *Winter Counts* is identity. Virgil is frequently bullied as a child, especially about him being an *iyeska*, a mixed-race individual. Virgil credits his success as the “local enforcer” to his experiences being bullied: “Yeah, I liked the fighting... Often I’d forget who it was I was pounding and begin to imagine I was back in junior high school” (93). Even though Virgil has been able to channel pain from his past into work he believes is for the greater good, he still struggles with his identity. For example, the reader learns that when Virgil’s father passed away, Virgil had been in the woods fasting and praying, hoping to find ways to help his father’s pancreatic cancer prognosis. When he returns to discover that his father died while he was gone, he loses all faith in traditional Lakota practices: “I knew then that Native traditions—the ceremonies, prayers, teachings—were horseshit” (17). However, as Virgil deals with the disappearance of his nephew, he is tested in ways he couldn’t have imagined, and his relationship with traditional Lakota beliefs and practices evolves.

An additional layer that helps *Winter Counts* shine is its influence from Native writer Louis Owens. In “A Conversation with David Heska Wanbli Weiden,” which is included in the paperback edition, the author states that *Winter Counts* “contains hidden tributes to a Native author and fairly well-known crime writer.” Later in the conversation, Weiden is less oblique and explains that he was “heavily influenced by the Native crime writer Louis Owens, who wrote some terrific indigenous crime novels in the 1990s.” While I did not locate all of the Easter egg references to Owens’s work in *Winter Counts*, I couldn’t help but observe the likeness in writing style. Owens’s crime novels utilize taut, sparse, and no-nonsense prose. Weiden takes that style and kicks it up a notch, making for an addicting and fast-paced read. In addition, I see a lot of similarities between Virgil and Cole McCurtain—the mixedblood protagonist of *The Sharpest Sight* and *Bone Game*—particularly with regard to identity. Both characters wish to embrace the full spectrum of their identities, but struggle to figure out how. Overarching themes about history and place are also ways in which *Winter Counts* makes nods to Owens’s work. Finally, in *Winter Counts*, as in Owens’s novels, the

crimes at hand are only a small part of the much bigger criminal story of settler colonialism.

The only minor critique I have of *Winter Counts* revolves around some of the characterizations, like those of Virgil. No doubt he is a nuanced and thoughtfully molded character, but some basic details seem to be missing. For example, it is difficult to determine Virgil's age. The reader knows he's been out of high school for at least a few years, and since he's raising his fourteen-year-old-nephew, I guesstimated that Virgil was somewhere in his mid-thirties or early forties. However, this seemed a bit old, at least to me, since Virgil's girlfriend Marie (who is his classmate and thus his same age) is applying to medical schools. While it's certainly not unrealistic to apply to medical school in your mid-thirties, this was an aspect of the book I wish had been cleared up. How old is Virgil? Additionally, the descriptions of characters' appearances are sparse, especially that of Virgil. The physicality that defines Virgil's character—as a vigilante beating up “bad guys”—suggests that he is an imposing, strong man, but the lack of specific descriptions make picturing him difficult.

Overall, Weiden expertly melds elements from the mystery genre with Native American literature to tell a fast-paced and distinctly addicting story. As a first-in-a-series novel, *Winter Counts* leaves readers begging for more with its taut prose, distinct storyworld, nuanced characters, and the seamless inclusion of Lakota cultural details. Furthermore, the unanimous praise that *Winter Counts* has received suggests that this novel is a much bigger story than simply an entertaining read about Virgil investigating a supposed heroin ring on the reservation. *Winter Counts* and its influence have the potential to make notable changes on the ground in Indian Country.

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