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Native American's novel will be Montana-made movie

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MISSOULA — A novel by celebrated American Indian writer James Welch is being made into a movie, and hundreds of people are showing up at auditions hoping to land a part.

Filmmakers and brothers Alex and Andrew Smith, who are twins, said they plan to start filming the movie based on the novel “Winter in the Blood” in July, and that it will be shot entirely in Montana.

Hasalyn Harris, the film's public relations director, said the cast will be exclusively Native American, and mostly from Montana.

“I think they're wanting it to be as authentic as possible,” she said Saturday as she took in hundreds of applications at the casting call at the University of Montana's University Center.

The novel by Welch, published in 1974, is described as a key book in the Native American Renaissance that began in the 1960s. It is set on the Fort Belknap Reservation and follows one man's struggle to find his identity and roots in a modern world while dealing with self-doubt and addiction.

Welch was born in 1940 at Browning to a Blackfeet father and a Gros Ventre mother and grew up mainly on the Fort Belknap Reservation. Welch died in 2003 at age 62.

“I would love to see it as a movie, period,” said Lois Welch, a retired University of Montana literature professor and widow of James. “I'm really touched about the way they've been able to keep it so close to the text.”

Alex and Andrew Smith, and writer Ken White, wrote the screenplay for the movie.

Mathew Weasel, 13, of Missoula, was one of those trying to land a part.

“I don't really know what's going to happen,” he said. “I'm just going to try my best.”

Perry Lilley Sr. was hoping to land the role of Lame Bull. He said he appeared in movies and on television in the past before drugs and alcohol ended his career.

“My wife told me about this, and my dreams flashed before me again,” Lilley said. “I get an opportunity to do this again, this time drug and alcohol free. Thank the Creator.”

Another casting call is planned in the coming months in eastern Montana.

Welch wrote about being an Indian in modern American society, and with each of his books came more accolades, a growing fan club and an international following that led to speaking invitations across Europe.

Welch's works were translated into French, and he was given France's Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters medal.

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