

Casting call for adaptation of novel set on reservation reels in hopefuls

By TRAVIS COLEMAN • Tribune Staff Writer •
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Weston Flamond has big-screen dreams despite coming from a small town with no movie theater.

The 21-year-old St. Mary resident looked to make his dreams come true Saturday by auditioning for a role in the film adaptation of Montanan James Welch's lauded novel, "Winter in the Blood."

Flamond does salvage work on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, but that's not his passion. Acting is what he wants to do, so Great Falls is where he needed to be Saturday. Flamond was among dozens of people of all ages vying for spots in the film, which is set on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation.

The auditions at the Civic Center continue today.

"Everyone wants to hit it big I guess, to be found in the middle of nowhere," said Nathan Bread of Great Falls, who auditioned along with his two children.

Producers were looking Saturday to cast Native American boys 10- to 15-years-old, including a younger version of the film's main character. Additionally, people with little acting experience could be used as extras.

"We're also looking for real authentic characters for a lot of different roles," said Alex Smith, a Montana filmmaker who wrote the screenplay with his brother Andrew Smith and writer Ken White.

The Smith brothers made the 2002 film "The Slaughter Rule" in and around Great Falls.

"Winter in the Blood," is scheduled to be shot entirely in Montana, including along the Hi-Line and in Fort Belknap, with most of the cast being Native American. Filming could start in mid-July, Alex Smith said.

"We want to make it as true to the book and as true to the world as possible," Alex Smith said.

"Winter in the Blood" is a harsh account of Virgil First Raise's life as he tries to find his identity while dealing with self-doubt and addiction. The book is partly influenced by Welch's upbringing in Fort Belknap. Welch's book was published in 1974 and was seen as a landmark novel for its descriptions of modern Native American life. A planned mid-1970s movie adaptation was shelved because of a lack of Native American movie stars.

"We hope the movie will draw more people to the book," Alex Smith said.

The Smith brothers were mentored by Welch, who died in 2003 at age 62, but never thought of bringing "Winter in the Blood" to the screen before White pushed the idea.

"Ken said, 'you need to make this movie,'" said Alex Smith, who first met White when he auditioned for "The Slaughter Rule." "It was so close to us that we couldn't see it."

The film won't be "feathers and beads," Alex Smith said, but rather a more contemporary view of Native American life. This isn't always the case in Hollywood for movies about Native Americans.

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GREAT FALLS, MONTANA

There is a buzz building in Montana around the movie, as more than 200 people auditioned at the film's first casting call in Missoula.

"It's about a guy having a rough go ... we hope it has a wide reach," Alex Smith said.

More auditions are possible, but they would happen around the area and time of initial filming. Great Falls native Rene Haynes is leading the casting calls, as she did for the recent "Twilight" films.

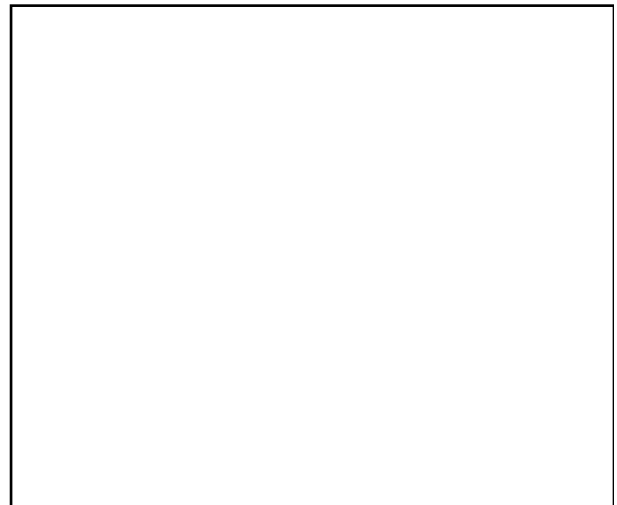
Derek Sorrelo, 13, may not want to be the next Taylor Lautner, a star of the "Twilight" series, but his audition motivation was clear.

"To get famous," he said.

Frankie Stiffarm of Fort Belknap said he read "Winter in the Blood" at least seven times. He brought his son along to the audition in hopes that one of them could land a role. Stiffarm is a logger with dreams of acting, like his dad, who acted in several Westerns.

"We're Gros Ventre," Stiffarm said. "We just want to be a part of it."

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