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'Winter in the Blood' reimagined: Work of renowned Native writer will become movie

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By JAMIE KELLY of the Missoulian | Posted: Saturday, February 13, 2010 10:00 pm | No Comments Posted

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[Buy this photo](#) Missoula author James Welch was photographed in 2000 after being awarded the Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters medal by the French government.



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Once upon a time, James Welch dreamed of seeing his words become pictures.

That was 26 years ago when Welch was first approached about turning his debut novel, "Winter in the Blood," into a movie.

"My diary from that night says, 'We went to bed giggling,' and then we fell asleep giggling," said Lois Welch, a retired University of Montana literature professor and widow of James, one of the most celebrated Indian novelists and poets in history.

James Welch, who was Blackfeet and Gros Ventre, and also Irish, died of a heart attack at the age of 62 in 2003. His work was lauded by critics the world over as deeply resonant not only of the Indian culture about which he wrote, but of all people.

"Winter in the Blood," released in 1974, got its highest praise from the New York Times Book Review, easily the standard-bearer of literary criticism in the country.

Shortly afterward, the novel was "optioned" by a film agency that sought to turn it into a motion picture.

Trouble is, it never happened.

But it has a second chance now.

Filmmakers Alex and Andrew Smith, directors and producers of the independent film "The Slaughter Rule" (2002), are currently working on turning the 200-page novel into a motion picture, one that will be filmed entirely in Montana, featuring a large cast of American Indians.

"I would love," said Lois Welch, in an interview from her Rattlesnake Valley home, "to see it as a movie. Period."

It's headed that way.

The Smith twins – Alex lives in Texas, Andrew in Missoula, both are Hellgate High School graduates and sons of writer Annick Smith – have plans to do just that.

"Ideally, we'll be shooting in July," said Andrew Smith, who will co-direct and co-produce the films with his brother, who teaches film at the University of Texas-Austin.

Alex and Andrew Smith, along with actor and writer Ken White, wrote the screenplay based on "Winter in the Blood" – a novel that was part of the "Indian Renaissance" of the late 1960s and early '70s, and is considered one of the best of the genre.

Lois Welch, who has known the Smith twins their entire life, has read the various versions of the script, first born as an idea in 2007.

She is pleased not only because the script, in its various phases, has honored her late-husband's novel by remaining as authentic to its sense of life as possible.

"I'm really touched about the way they've been able to keep it so close to the text," she said.

"Winter in the Blood" is written in the first person by an Indian man of 32, who straddles the "rez" world with the world of self-doubt, addiction and a deep, foreboding identity crisis. He is a modern Indian in a modern world, struggling to find his roots.

Set on the Fort Belknap Reservation, the novel shows with stark, unromantic and unflinchingly realistic imagery life on the reservation and one man's struggle to find his identity through a haze of alcohol, anger and meaningless sex.

It is partly based on the life that James Welch knew and saw while growing up.

Born in Browning in 1940 and raised primarily on the Fort Belknap Reservation, Welch was the son of a Blackfeet father and a Gros Ventre mother. A talented writer as a teenager, he attended the University of Montana and studied under his mentor, the poet Richard Hugo.

"Winter in the Blood" would be among his most acclaimed novels, which also include "Fool's Crow," "The Indian Lawyer" and the nonfiction "Killing Custer," which became an Emmy Award-winning documentary. He received the American Book Award, among numerous other literary honors. His fame as an author spread internationally, and he frequently traveled overseas for speaking engagements.

In 2000, the French government awarded Welch the medal of Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters.

"Winter in the Blood" was given a cinematic chance in 1975 shortly after being published, but the filmmakers quickly found that the movie studio couldn't attract the money needed to finance a film starring a Native American actor, said Lois Welch.

"Name an Indian actor from the 1970s," she said. "Name one from today."

Andrew Smith said he's confident there's enough lasting interest in Welch's story that it will actually see the big screen. On Saturday, First Raise Productions held an audition in Missoula for small parts, all of them to be filled by American Indians.

The film's public relations director, Hasalyn Harris, said the cast of "Winter in the Blood" will be exclusively Native, and mostly from Montana.

"I think they're wanting it to be as authentic as possible," she said Saturday as she fielded hundreds of applications at the casting call in UM's University Center (see related story).

Though the first attempt at a movie version flamed out, Smith said First Raise has every intention of seeing the project through to its completion. Already, it is pursuing financing and has scheduled casting calls for secondary roles and extras.

"I'm very confident we'll make this film," said Smith. "And confident we're going to get the money."

Lois Welch, too, is confident that her husband's work will finally reach the big screen. And though she can't giggle herself to sleep with her husband anymore, she's more confident now than she was 26 years ago.

"I know Alex and Andrew so well," she said. "And I love them and trust them."

Reporter Jamie Kelly can be reached at 523-5254 or at jkelly@missoulian.com.

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