



The Indian Lawyer

James Welch

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Sylvester Yellow Calf is a former reservation basketball star, a promising young lawyer, and a possible congressional candidate. But when a parolee ensnares him in a blackmail scheme, he'll have to decide just who he is, and what he wants.

The Indian Lawyer Details

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Author : James Welch

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Ron says

First published in 1990, this is a thoughtful and suspenseful novel by a Native American writer from Montana. I had previously read his *Winter in the Blood* (1974) and *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979). All three novels concern the complexities of living as an Indian in a white-dominated world.

Unlike the struggling social cast-offs in the earlier novels, the protagonist of *The Indian Lawyer* has by all appearances successfully assimilated to white culture. Sylvester Yellow Calf has parlayed statewide recognition on the high school basketball court into a university education and law school. He is now one of the rising members of a high-end law firm in Helena...

Read my review at my blog.

David Jordan says

Interesting portrait of Sylvester Yellow Calf, a Blackfoot Indian who has risen from reservation poverty to become a college basketball star, Stanford Law School grad, prosperous attorney, Montana parole board member and potential congressional candidate. Despite his successes, Yellow Calf sees himself as an interloper in white society and perhaps a phony. His life starts to unravel when a convict's wife sets out to seduce him so he can be blackmailed into releasing her husband. Hampered by a limp denouement to the blackmail plot. Welch, who died in 2003, was a Montana Blackfoot and, like Sherman Alexie and Louis Erdrich, a prominent figure in Native American lit.

Larry Strattner says

I bought this book based upon its title, since I have been doing research into Native American culture for something I am writing.

The book was surprising since it was almost procedural in nature yet had absolutely no predictable turns or pat solutions. Every time I felt as if I might predict an outcome it did not develop.

I read many thrillers, particularly series, and it might be a slight exaggeration, but this story follows what I might call the "steps" of such a story without delivering any of the set-piece outcomes.

Many of the story's emotional/thoughtful moments are penetrating and provoking.

The ending in particular is gently surprising and somehow "right." I found the book engaging, thought-provoking and satisfying. If you like character-centered stories this is a very good read.

EB Fitzsimons says

Very much evocative of a certain time (late 80s/ early nineties) and place (the West), Welch's writing is

intimately connected to nature and the modern world of office drudgery and parole boards. Even the small missteps (a bit of clunky dialogue or overwrought emotion) make it so much more sincere, and sometimes beautifully revelatory.

April says

A damn good book. A stunning portrait of the human condition. As haunting and unnerving as it is fascinating and thrilling. Along the lines of Anuradha Roy's An Atlas of Impossible Longing and John Steinbeck's East of Eden, The Indian Lawyer is a reminder of the old adage, "Oh, what a tangled web we weave." There isn't a hero or a villain, everyone is flawed but also humanized in an extremely detailed way.

It's a modern *Prince and the Pauper*-esque exploration of race and class and gender. Jack Harwood and Sylvester Yellow Calf are both intelligent Native American males who grew up on the reservation, yet one's been in prison for eight years and the other is a successful lawyer in a prestigious Helena firm.

This novel is completely engrossing. I knew from the beginning that things were possibly going to end tragically but the characters were so fully human and the writing so good that I had to finish, regardless. It actually wasn't that tragic in the end! Nice. I'm so glad I read this book.

Trigger warnings: rape, substance use/abuse, verbal abuse.

Mary says

More conventionally told than the elliptical *Winter in the Blood*, and lacking the lyrical, elegiac mysticism of *Fools Crow*, but powerful in its straightforward, modern portrayal of an extraordinarily talented man who faces the ordinary human challenge of determining who he is in the world.

Sylvester Yellow Calf, abandoned as an infant by his mother and alcoholic father, is raised on the Blackfeet reservation in Browning, MT by his maternal grandparents. A standou high school basketball player, his star just continues to ascend through an illustrious career at Montana State and then Stanford Law. Sly is mentored in his law careere by the managing partner of his Helena law firm, who has high hopes that Sylvester will agree to run for Congress.

All is proceeding like clockwork till the state prison parole board on which Yellow Calf serves decides against parole for Jack Harmon, who has spent 7 of the past 9 years behind bars. Harmon is hanging on to his marriage by a thread and will do whatever it takes to get released, even if it means blackmail.

Ann says

Sylvester Yellow Calf has successfully assimilated into white society and is running for Congress, until he runs into blackmail and faces the costs of his assimilation. Set in Montana.

Brian says

The Indian Lawyer is an example of a good story that doesn't try to do too much. There are only a few key plot twists to make things interesting, but otherwise just an emphasis on the characters and the story. I also liked that the book felt "real." The references to legal concepts, and Indian law concepts in particular, felt authentic. The setting also felt authentic and Welch is particularly talented at describing and using the location and geography to contribute to the story. Descriptions felt "real" in much the same way that Walter Mosley's descriptions of L.A. and the Bay Area do. The incorporation of Montana cities and reservations into the story added to its effectiveness and kept me interested throughout.

Sam says

For so many reasons, I'm ashamed to say that this is my first James Welch novel. I had heard of Welch while in high school, but having been in college for so long I'm only just starting to get back into reading non-assigned texts.

Having said that, what an amazingly talented Montana author! Although there is no true villain or hero, Welch portrays endearing, flawed characters throughout the novel. As a Montanan, Welch was able to portray not only his characters, but the social and political dynamics of the state as well. The assumptions, the conflicts, the conversations - they all rang true in my mind, almost 25 years later. To be able to paint such a true and endearing portrait is a rare talent, and he was one.

Alicia says

I rather like Welch's prose but I didn't like how he jumped around in regards to POV. It was third person POV throughout the book but he changed the subject often. We got at least 10 different characters POV's but there was never a new chapter to mark this. One paragraph would be Sylvester and then the next sentence would be Patti, it frustrated me a lot. I did like the idea of Sylvester's life but I thought the extortion plot wasn't essential. It could've been a lot stronger had it just been about his struggles as a lawyer and budding congressman.

Jo Stafford says

I loved The Indian Lawyer. I found it difficult to put down. Just one more chapter, I kept telling myself, and before I knew it, I'd read 100 pages in one sitting.

This is tight, well-paced, engrossing storytelling. Sylvester and Patti Ann are particularly well-drawn characters. Patti Ann's loneliness and vulnerability are palpable, and Sylvester's ambivalence about his life as a successful lawyer is explored with great sensitivity.

In James Welch's hands, the Montana landscape springs to life as vividly as do the lives of the recently-released ex-cons who aim to wreak havoc in Sylvester's congressional run.

Sometimes when circumstances beyond your control derail your best-laid plans, you unexpectedly find yourself exactly where you need to be.

Don J. says

I will hand my Creative Writing degree track this: it opened me up to a plethora of authors and genres that I would have never previously looked twice at. "The Indian Lawyer" is one such book that I may have never looked at had it not been assigned to me. And the result...is gratitude.

This book gives readers a unique perspective on what it means to be a Native American in modern America, or more accurately, what it's like to be a successful one. Sylvester Yellow Calf, a successful lawyer who grows up on the poverty-stricken streets of Browning, Montana, must come to terms with his double-life. His success alienates him from his own people while thrusting him in the midst of a world that treats him as an outsider. I won't spoil anything, but readers have a great opportunity to step into the shoes of "the other" and experience the pain and strife that comes with it.

On another note, Welch's use of third-person perspective is top-notch. He often switches perspectives to allow readers to view the conflict from different perceptions; while that isn't uncommon, Welch makes sure to insert every character's biases, experiences, and fears into it --so you really are able to see where everyone is coming from. He also possesses a rare ability to shift seamlessly from exposition to narrative, so well you often don't even realize it's happened until he jumps you back to when it first transitioned. Welch is a fine talent and if you are interested in a solid, well-crafted read, pick it up.

Alyssa says

This book was... bland. Because Jim Welch is a poet, I expected much much more from him. However, I only got concrete details and a story skeleton. If you want to learn some small facts about Native American tradition and the ongoing racism against them, this book might help you... or you might lose interest in your adventure all together. "The Indian Lawyer" describes the life of Sylvester Yellow Calf and his struggle with home and not home, who he is and who he is supposed to be, and, of course as all great Native American stories must have, complex sex with white women. I don't recommend it.

Sarah Peters says

James Welch's *The Indian Lawyer* is the story of Sylvester Yellow Calf, a successful Blackfeet lawyer slowly making his way up the political ladder, while at the same time trying to reconcile his Native American heritage with his urban life. Welch shifts perspectives between Sylvester and several other characters, but the switches are done smoothly. The thing that stuck out the most for me with this novel is Welch's ability to represent several very different voices in an honest, straight to the point way. The prose is straight to the point, yet carries over elements from Welch's poetic background.

The girl in the afternoon says

Task: Popsugar Reading Challenge 2018 - Nordic Native noir - 4/5 stars

I picked this up on a whim, and holy crap, I'm so glad I did! What a writer. Tense and psychologically acute throughout.
