

# Weiden, David Heska Wanbli, (2021) *Winter Counts*. Ecco.

## Review by Cherie Rankin

David Heska Wanbli Weiden's debut novel, *Winter Counts*, is a riveting look at the power of family, tradition, and connection. Set on the Lakota Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota, the author draws on the poignancy of all three when they are entwined in battling the drug trade on the reservation that threatens the life of its people.

The title *Winter Counts* is a reference to traditional Native American calendars, kept on animal hide or cloth and created by painting on symbols and pictures to memorialize the significant events of each year. The protagonist, Virgil Wounded Horse, and his sister, Sybil, made them as children with paper and crayons, including the year they lost their mother when they were young.

Virgil Wounded Horse is an enforcer who metes out justice when the authorities fail or refuse to do so, when they turn a blind eye to domestic abuse, rape, and child molestation. Beginning to doubt his path and feeling the physical effects of both fighting and aging, Virgil considers giving up this life and taking more traditional work. When he's asked by Ben Short Bear, tribal councilman and father of Virgil's ex-girlfriend Marie, to investigate and take down a man bringing heroin onto the reservation, he's reluctant to get involved. But when it strikes close to home and his nephew Nathan nearly dies from experimenting with heroin – and then gets wrapped up in the formal investigation when he's asked to be a mole for the feds after drugs are put in his locker to frame him – Virgil recommits to his role as enforcer. The majority of the novel focuses on Nathan's seemingly hopeless predicament, a young man forced to put his life at risk and make difficult choices if he's ever to be free.

The novel is a story of both entanglement and separation. One of the primary entanglements is family. Family is central to Virgil's story and to the narrative; he and his sister lose both parents fairly early on, and Sybil dies in a car accident, leaving a son, Nathan, to be raised by Virgil. The novel focuses on their relationship and how it motivates Virgil's actions, in his desire to hang onto the one family connection he has left and to raise his nephew well. Virgil's ex-girlfriend Marie, the daughter of a powerful tribal councilman, is constantly entangled in what her family's expectations of her are and how those expectations differ from her own priorities and dreams.

The other constant entanglement is with the reservation, with tribal tradition, tribal identity. There is a pull to remain, even in the face of incredible difficulty and ugliness. At one point, Virgil says:

Why didn't I leave? People here always talked about going to Rapid City or Sioux Falls or Denver, getting a job and making a clean break. Putting aside Native ways and assimilating, adapting to suburban life. But I thought about the sound of the drummers at a pow-wow, the smell of wild sage, the way little Native kids looked dressed up in their first regalia, the flash of the sun coming up over the hills. I wondered if I could ever really leave the

reservation, because the rez was in my mind, a virtual rez, one that I was seemingly stuck with. (48)

Marie feels this as well, struggling to decide between going to a local tribal college or leaving for medical school. Even though she has options outside the reservation, Marie chooses to give back by working for the tribal council on things like food grant programs. She clings to ‘the old ways,’ to Lakota tradition and ceremony, which Virgil at first vehemently rejects. It is Marie who pushes Virgil—when Nathan is in trouble—to pursue remedy and healing through sweat lodges and a yuwipi ceremony.

Yet there is separation, even amid these entanglements. One of the primary separations Virgil and Nathan experience is the injury of class. Even on the reservation, where poverty is commonplace, Virgil grew up comparatively poor. When Nathan gets in trouble, Virgil has to accept help from Ben Short Bear to pay for a lawyer, a lawyer Ben chooses. In this he and Nathan are particularly vulnerable. One can never be sure if the help is trustworthy, but refusing it really is not an option when Nathan is looking at jail.

And there is the isolation of race, of blood—of being a ‘half-blood,’ or of even being not fully Lakota. Marie grows up somewhat an outsider at the local school because her mother is not Lakota but Osage. Nathan expresses his frustration with the way other kids treat him because he is ‘not Indian enough.’ At one point he says ‘And iyeska, I been called that since the day I was born. You know, it’s like I’m not Indian enough for the full-bloods, but too Native for the white kids. I don’t fit in nowhere’ (217).

Lakota language is woven into the narrative, much in the way it is woven into the characters’ lives. The author often leaves the meaning of the words for the reader to wrestle with for a while before explaining. The term *iyeska* is used multiple times in the novel before it’s explained a couple hundred pages in. This feels like a deliberate refusal to make the meaning easy for the unfamiliar reader; it’s effective and appealing.

One of the most intriguing moments in the narrative is when Virgil and Marie make a road trip to Denver, seeking out the man Virgil’s been told is bringing heroin onto the reservation. On the way they see a roadside attraction, cars arranged in the shape of Stonehenge. When the two of them stop to examine the giant sculptural shapes, Virgil has the first of several visions in the book, visions which show how he comes to open himself to the old ways, to the unknown, to open his mind and heart to what he has defensively walled off.

The narrative is often violent, meaningfully so. Life on the reservation is mean for many. Virgil recounts horrible things he’s seen in the course of his work. We get excruciating detail of the punishment he deals to those in need of it; you can feel thumbs stretched until the ligaments pop, bones snap. You feel the pain Virgil endures after a savage beating. The violence and terror running through the drug trade is palpable. One of the worst characters in the narrative turns out to have been serially sexually abused as a child. Pain begets pain, and the reader is not spared.

That is not to say that this isn’t a beautiful book. It is. It is beautiful in its starkness, in its honesty, in its rawness. The beauty and grace of connection shine even brighter set against the darker

elements of the tale—Virgil’s love for his nephew, Virgil and Marie’s reconnection, Virgil’s slow-growing giving over to the pull of the Old Ways and the connection to things he cannot explain, which nevertheless pull him through.

**Reviewer Bio**

**Cherie Rankin** is a Professor of English at Heartland Community College, poet, and long-time member (and past President) of the Working-Class Studies Association.