

Mystery Books by Indigenous Authors

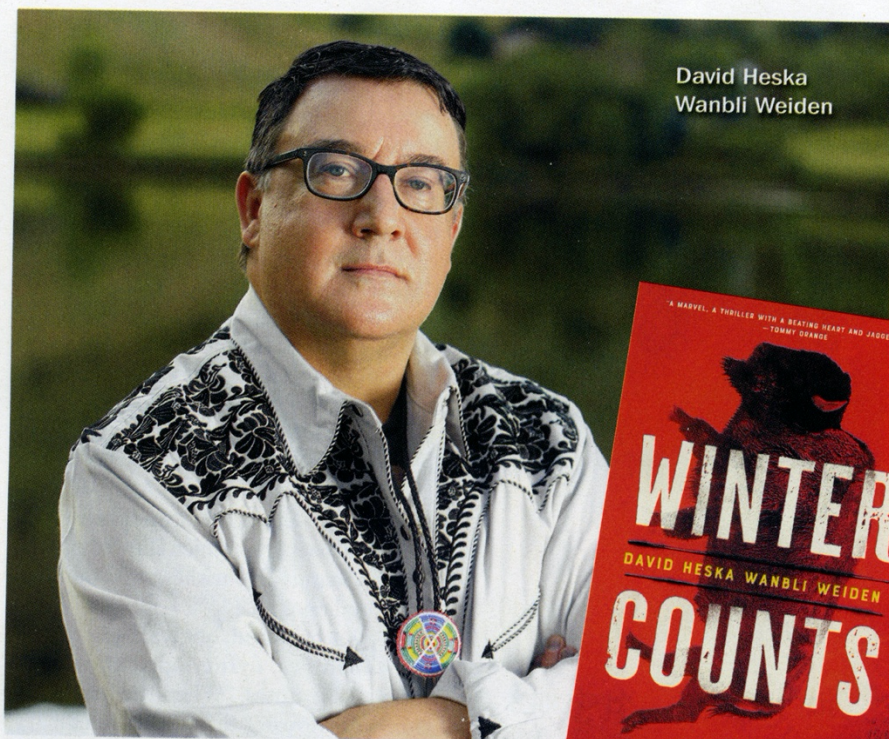
Attached is an article, "Native Cultures, New Voices" by Craig Sisterson which appeared in *Mystery Scene* magazine, Number 173 2022.

I am listing below significant authors mentioned in the article. For details, read the article! Generally below I list the first book in a series, although the author of this article rightly lists the newest of any books published.

I have reorganized the list into alphabetical by last name. I have added a link for more information -- the link might lead to Wikipedia, the author's website, or other places.

Author	Author's Indigenous Bkgd	Book	Comments
Wayne Arthurson	Canada First Nations: Cree	<i>Fall From Grace</i> , 2011	Leo Desroches, born to a Cree mother, an Aboriginal Issues reporter with gambling and drinking problems, in Edmonton, Alberta
Louise Erdrich	Chippewa	<i>The Round House</i> , 2012	It is crime fiction, and a novel with serious themes yet without much mystery. Won National Book Award.
Tony Hillerman	white	<i>The Blessing Way</i> , 1970 #1 of 18 Leaphorn and Chee books written 1970-2006	Extremely popular and path-setting series about a Native American mystery protagonist. Book #3 won the Edgar for best 1974 novel.
Linda Hogan	Chickasaw	<i>Mean Spirit</i> , 1991.	Poet, novelist, writer-in-residence
Sara Sue Hoklotubbe	Cherokee Nation	<i>Deception on All Accounts</i> , 2003 #1 of 4 -Featuring Sadie Walela, daughter of a Cherokee father and white mother, and a banker in the Cherokee Nation of northeastern Oklahoma	Re Book #1: "Sara Sue Hoklotubbe takes a fresh plot idea, adds her clear-eyed Cherokee view of tribal thinking and small town Oklahoma banking, and gives us a dandy mystery novel. Don't miss it." ~Tony Hillerman
Stephen Graham Jones	Blackfeet	<i>The Baby Sitter Lives</i> , 2022	At least 26 books, more in the horror genre than crime fiction genre
Thomas King aka Hartley GoodWeather	Cherokee	<i>DreadfulWater Shows Up</i> , 2002 #1 of 5, all humorous mysteries written 2002 - 2020. Finalist 3 times for top awards.	King has written a number of children's books and novels, and at least one serious treatise (<i>The Inconvenient Indian</i>). DreadfulWater is the surname of his main character (no explanation of the weird name); Book 1 revolves around a luxury condo development built by Indigenous people. Humorous dialogue combines with crises in relationships as the bodies pile up and the clues abound. It's a satisfying and fun, comic mystery.

Author	Author's Indigenous Bkgd	Book	Comments
Carole LaFavor	Objibwa	<i>Along the Journey River</i> , 1996 #1 of 2 in Renee Laroche series.	Objibwa teacher, "two-spirit" Renee LaRoche investigates. By Lesbian author.
Mardi Oakley Medawar	Cherokee, lives on the Red Cliff Chippewa Reservation	<i>Death at Rainy Mountain</i> , 1996 #1 of 4 with Tay-bodal, a 19th-century Kiowa healer in Oklahoma	Set during the post-Civil War era.
Louis Owens	Choctaw-Cherokee	5 non-series mysteries with a few recurring characters. 1991-1999	Feature mixed-race Native Americans in different settings.
Marcie R Rendon	White Earth Anishinabe	<i>Murder on the Red River</i> , 2017 #1 of 3 Cash and Wheaton stories	Cash Blackbear, an 18, then 19-year-old Ojibwe woman, sometimes helps her guardian Sheriff Wheaton on his investigations. The 2nd Native American to be nominated for an Edgar.
Linda Rodriguez	Cherokee	<i>Every Last Secret</i> , 2012 #1 of 3	Marquitta "Skeet" Bannion, a half-Cherokee ex-Kansas City homicide detective, now chief of the campus police force at Chouteau University, in Brewster, Missouri
D. M. Rowell	Kiowa	<i>Never Name the Dead</i> , 2022	A marketing media and documentary producer writes her first mystery using her Kiowa heritage.
Martin Cruz Smith	Pueblo	<i>Gorky Park</i> , 1981 #1 of 9	Protagonists are NOT indigenous. Best known for the his Russian detective series; also many other books. The 1st Native American to be nominated for an Edgar.
David Heska Wanbli Weiden	Lacota Sincangu	<i>Winter Counts</i> , 2020	HUGE number of awards for this 1st book. The 3rd Native American to be nominated for an Edgar.



David Heska
Wanbli Weiden

Native Cultures, New Voices

After years of seeing themselves depicted by white authors in novels, mysteries written by indigenous authors are increasingly bringing their own voices and perspectives to enrich and advance the genre.

by Craig Sistonson

The budding author listened as his story of a vigilante meting out justice on a reservation was savaged by fellow MFA students. He was one of the only writers of color in the room, the only one interested in crime. They didn't like his "true native noir," didn't find it believable: "People on reservations don't listen to rap music, you don't know what you're talking about."

Looking back now, a decade later, award-

winning Lakota Sicangu author David Heska Wanbli Weiden says he knew his classmates were wrong, that none of them had ever set foot on a reservation. He'd spent a lot of time on Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota, every summer of his childhood. His mother's birthplace. Now, he takes his own children.

The Denver professor knew "rez life" realities were far more nuanced and diverse

than the stereotypes many, like the MFA students, seemed to hold. But he was still discouraged.

Wanbli Weiden's experience gives further credence to the arguments of another award-winning indigenous writer, Wayne Arthurson, that historic domination by white authors of "Native Mysteries" risks realistic tales by native voices being wrongly seen as "inauthentic."

HIDDEN VOICES, HIDDEN CRIMES

In articles for *The Globe and Mail* and *Mystery Tribune*, Wayne Arthurson—a crime writer of Cree and French-Canadian heritage—observes that for too long the "Native Mysteries" that dominate bookseller shelves, recommended lists, awards, and media attention, have been written by authors who aren't indigenous. Even in 2022, a quick glance on Goodreads shows only one native author, Cherokee novelist Mardi Oakley Medawar, in the top 50 of a list of 145 books with Native American detectives. There are as many Iranian authors of Native American protagonists in the Top 50 as "own voices" bringing their lived experience.

But is that belatedly beginning to change?

"I've always wanted to write mysteries, since I was ten years old and picked up my first Trixie Belden book," says Kiowa author D.M. Rowell, whose memories of elders telling her stories and her desire to help keep her tribe's language, history, and culture alive helped inspire *Never Name the Dead*, her debut mystery published this November.

Until she read Tony Hillerman's *Leaphorn and Chee* books, Rowell says she'd never seen a native main character in the mysteries she loved. But even though Rowell was "absolutely enthralled" by the layered and respectful depictions of Navajo culture she read, for decades she still didn't envisage someone like herself as the one writing such pages.

Wanbli Weiden, who is also a fan of Hillerman (but not all of the white authors who followed in his footsteps), got his short story published in *Yellow Medicine Review* in 2014.

The main character, Virgil Wounded Horse, and underlying real-life issues lingered.

"This little seed in the back of my mind said you need to write something about the fact that 40% of crimes go unpunished on reservations and really bad people are just set free," says Wanbli Weiden, pointing to the injustice of the Major Crimes Act, a 19th century law that prevents native peoples

from prosecuting serious crimes on their own lands.

So, years later, his short story grew into the groundbreaking novel *Winter Counts*.

"I truly didn't know if anybody cared about a native crime novel," says Wanbli Weiden, who is a Professor of Native American studies and political science at Metropolitan State University in Denver.

A NEW SEASON FOR NATIVE MYSTERIES?

Winter Counts is an astonishing debut centered on a tribal enforcer who earns a living by meting out punishment when the broken justice system doesn't. When heroin snakes into the Rosebud Reservation and bites his nephew, Virgil teams with his ex to uncover the source, all while having to confront issues with his own *Iyeska* (mixed blood) identity.

Authors such as Ian Rankin and Dennis Lehane have called crime fiction "the modern social novel," and *Winter Counts* is a superb example. It's a powerful page-turner that delivers a clear-eyed view of modern "life on the rez" and insights into a range of issues and injustices.

With its critical acclaim, strong sales at home and overseas, and numerous awards wins, *Winter Counts* may become a landmark in native mysteries, akin to how the success of Jane Harper's *The Dry* opened readers' eyes and publishers' doors to Australian crime (or Stieg Larsson for Scandi Noir). For while indigenous authors, in North America and globally, have historically been rare in mystery writing, Wanbli Weiden is not alone.

White Earth Anishinabe author Marcie R. Rendon's terrific Cash Blackbear series set in 1970s Minnesota has been picked up by larger New York publisher Soho Press; the third tale, *Sinister Graves*, comes out in October. Prolific Blackfeet storyteller Stephen Graham Jones, who mixes literary stylings with horror, speculative, and crime stories, is becoming ever-more popular thanks to *The Only Good Indians* (2020) and *My Heart Is a Chainsaw* (2021). In 2020, Arthurson became the first-ever First Nations winner of an Arthur Ellis Award for best Canadian crime writing, for *The Red Chesterfield*. This September, the groundbreaking lesbian mysteries of Two-Spirit Ojibwa novelist and activist Carole laFavor, *Along the Journey River* (1996) and *Evil Dead Center* (1997), are published in the United Kingdom for the first time.

At the Edgar Awards, sometimes called the "Oscars of crime writing," Rendon's *Girl Gone Missing* was nominated for the Sue



Wayne Arthurson



D.M. Rowell



Sara Sue Hoklotubbe

Grafton Memorial Award in 2020, and Wanbli Weiden's *Winter Counts* for Best First Novel in 2021. The second and third Native American nominees ever, in quick succession, more than 40 years after the first.

Last December, The Rap Sheet surveyed 21 different awards and calculated *Winter Counts* was the most honored crime novel of 2021 (just ahead of S.A. Cosby's *Blacktop Wasteland*). It turned out many people cared deeply about Wanbli Weiden's native noir. It was also nominated for the Hammett Prize for "literary excellence in crime writing," and this May it won the Specsavers Debut Crime Novel Award at CrimeFest in the United Kingdom.

It's long overdue, but the signs are there: We're seeing a range of newer voices as well as greater visibility for indigenous writers in the genre. Small streams become great rivers.

INDIGENOUS PIONEERS

Pop quiz: If Marcie R. Rendon and David Heska Wanbli Weiden are the second and third indigenous authors nominated for the Edgars, who was first? A hint: a giant of global thriller writing, though many readers are unaware of his indigenous heritage. The answer?

Martin Cruz Smith, author of modern classic *Gorky Park* (1981), and creator of Arkady Renko, a Soviet investigator embraced by Western audiences during the Cold War.

That book (first of nine Renko tales) was a huge international bestseller, won the prestigious Gold Dagger, and saw Cruz Smith, who is a mix of Spanish, Pueblo, Senecu del Sur, and Yaqui ancestry, praised for bringing a literary touch to thrillers; reviews compared him to John le Carré, Fyodor

Dostoevsky, and Graham Greene.

Gorky Park was Cruz Smith's 19th novel, many written under various pseudonyms. A few years earlier he'd tapped into his Pueblo heritage with breakthrough *Nightwing* (1977), a fascinating thriller nominated for the Edgar Award for Best Novel and also adapted into a film. Deputy Sheriff Youngman Duran is called to the Hopi reservation to investigate several horrifying deaths, including the mutilated body of an elderly shaman. Recognizing the significance of the shaman's spell, Duran teams with two scientists to combat a supernatural scourge.

Although it's now overshadowed by Cruz Smith's Renko novels, *Nightwing* was a major thriller in its time. Cruz Smith reportedly received more than half a million dollars for paperback rights alone, granting him the financial security to work on *Gorky Park*, which he'd been researching and writing for years. He was even able to buy back the rights from a publisher who didn't believe a thriller with a Soviet hero would sell.

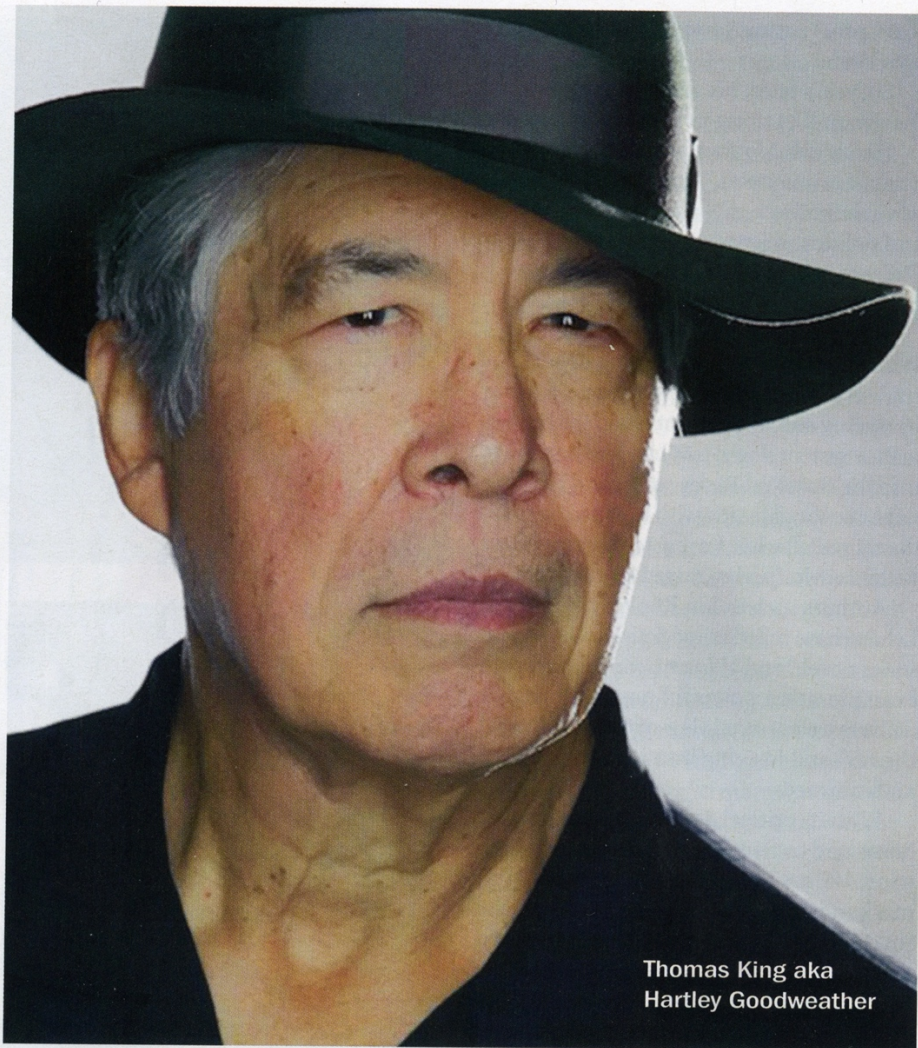
As Wanbli Weiden pointed out in our conversations and in online pieces where he's quick to use his success to highlight other indigenous writers, Cruz Smith debuted 50 years ago, but he wasn't the first native crime novelist. That distinction, says Cruz Smith "likely goes to Cherokee author John Rollin Ridge," who wrote *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta*, an 1854 novel about a man seeking vengeance after his family is murdered by settlers.

Then during the Golden Age era of Agatha Christie and Ngaio Marsh, Chocktaw author Todd Downing published a series of mysteries featuring US Customs Agent Hugh Rennert. In 2020, American Mystery Classics issued a new edition of *Vultures in the Sky*, Downing's 1935 novel of murder aboard a Mexico City bound train, with an introduction by James Sallis.

In recent decades several other indigenous storytellers have added their voices to the chorus of crime fiction, though until recently they've often been rather muffled by a bestselling behemoth and many non-native authors who followed in his footsteps.

IN THE SHADOW OF LEAPHORN

Four years before Cruz Smith received an Edgar nomination for his tale of a Hopi deputy sheriff investigating a supernatural curse, another book starring a native detective won the 1974 Edgar Award for Best Novel: *Dance Hall of the Dead*, by Tony Hillerman.



Thomas King aka
Hartley Goodweather

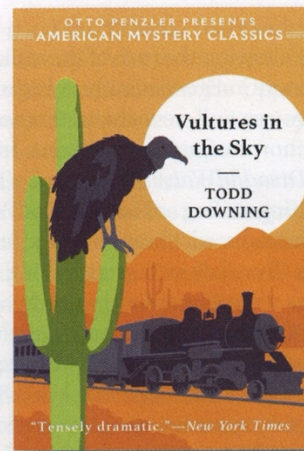
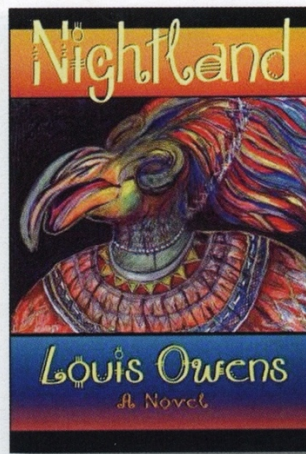
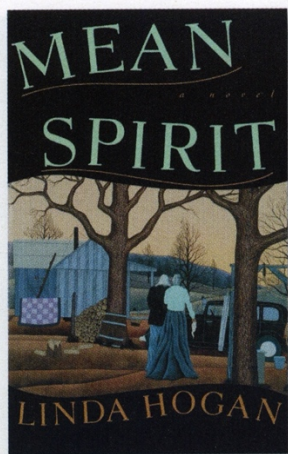
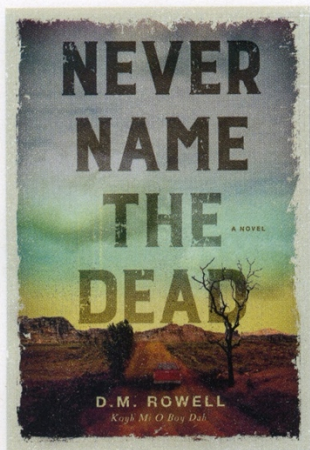
Hillerman was born during the Great Depression in what's now a ghost town in Oklahoma, going to school with Potawatomi children before earning Silver and Bronze Stars and the Purple Heart while serving in Europe as a teenager in the Second World War. Injured by a landmine, he lost his sight in one eye and part of his foot. While driving through the Navajo Nation in 1945, he met riders dressed for an Enemy Way ceremony to heal Navajo marines returning from the war in the Pacific. Hillerman witnessed part of the ceremony to rid the veterans of harmful evil spirits they'd encountered while being involved in so much death.

Many years later, after working as a journalist, then teacher in New Mexico, Hillerman incorporated Navajo ceremonies and culture into his debut mystery, *The Blessing Way* (1970), which featured Navajo Tribal Police Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn and kick-started a long-running, hugely popular series that was translated into several languages and thrust Native American characters into a prominent place in global mys-

tery writing for the first time.

This year a new screen adaptation, *Dark Winds*, continues the legacy of Leaphorn, bringing Hillerman's characters, settings, and stories to millions of modern viewers. Superb Lakota actor Zahn McClarnon (*Longmire*, *Fargo*) is the latest to step into Leaphorn's boots, following Fred Ward in a 1991 film, and Wes Studi in three PBS telemovies in the early 2000s. Hualapai actor Kiowa Gordon plays Hillerman's Sergeant Jim Chee, following in the footsteps of Lou Diamond Phillips and Adam Beach. Talking to the *New York Post* ahead of the premiere, McClarnon said he's seen a lot of change in how the entertainment industry tells Native American stories. Many of the production personnel, cast, and crew on *Dark Winds* are indigenous. "I think we're finally getting to have a little more control over our stories and our narrative," said McClarnon.

As Hillerman was becoming the leading voice in "Native Mysteries"—inspiring other white writers to pen tales starring native



sleuths, of varying quality—several indigenous authors were crafting their own stories and narratives and paving the way for recent fresh voices.

SOCIAL NOVELS AND SURREALISM

“I’ve argued the most important Native American crime writer was Louis Owens,” says Wanbli Weiden. “He pioneered a style which set the stage. He incorporated a call for political action, social commentary, and a surrealistic style. He’s not really included in the canon of great crime writers and I’ve been arguing for a long time he should be.”

A Choctaw-Cherokee professor, Owens served as a forest ranger and firefighter in the Washington State wilderness in his early twenties before becoming a key figure in the nascent field of Native American studies and a leading scholar on John Steinbeck. He taught at universities in California and New Mexico, and wrote five novels in his final decade.

The second, *The Sharpest Sight* (1992), won the Roman Noir Prize, a French award for outstanding mystery novel. Blending murder mystery and vision quest, it sees Deputy Sheriff Mundo Morales investigating the death of his Vietnam War buddy Attis McCurtain, who was meant to be confined to a mental institution for killing the love of his life. Meanwhile Cole, Attis’ draft-age brother, searches for his identity and Attis’ bones in Mississippi.

Reviews at the time praised the “strong sense of culture, place, and Indian spiritual reality” (*Kirkus*) while noting the extreme hardboiled style and comparing the way Owens blended violent realities with the “mythic and fantastic” in his dusty setting to the fictional terrains of Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez. Owens also won an American Book Award for “outstanding literary achievement” for *Nightland* (1996),

the story of two half-Cherokee ranchers who find a dead man and a million dollars in the New Mexico desert.

“Louis Owens used both realistic and surreal elements to analyze issues of culture and identity,” says Wanbli Weiden. “This mixture of hardboiled prose, social commentary, and a mythical narrative created a uniquely Native style of crime fiction.”

The 1990s also saw other important indigenous voices emerge. Chickasaw poet and storyteller Linda Hogan was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1991 for *Mean Spirit*, a mystery set against the infamous Osage Murders in the 1920s, where several wealthy Osage were killed following the discovery of oil deposits beneath their land. In 1996, Cherokee author Mardi Oakley Medawar published *Death at Rainy Mountain*, launching a four-book mystery series set during the post-Civil War era, starring Kiowa healer Tay-bodal.

The same year, Two-Spirit novelist and nurse Carole laFavor published the first lesbian native mystery, *Along the Journey River*, featuring Ojibwa social worker Renee LaRoche investigating the mysterious disappearance of several sacred artifacts from the Minnesota Red Earth Reservation, then the murder of the tribal chairman. Renee returned in *Evil Dead Center* (1997), where a death sparks an investigation into the foster care system and the abuse and trauma its inflicted on native peoples. The re-release of both books in 2017 underscored the significance of laFavor’s writing to the indigenous literary canon, said Professor Lisa Tatonetti in a foreword to the new editions. It also served “to remind us of the power of her activism for HIV-positive Native peoples, and to return her important claims for the centrality of Two-Spirit peoples, bodies, and histories to the public eye.”



Linda Hogan

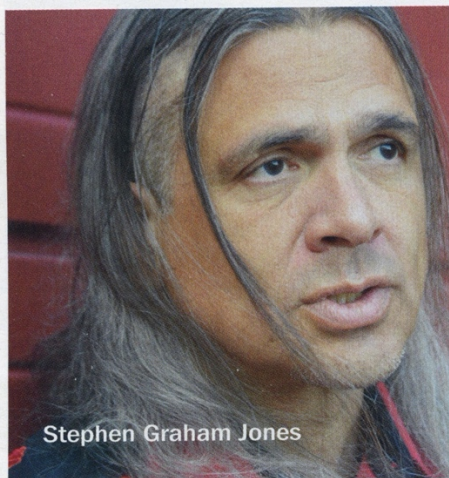
NEW MILLENNIUM, NEW ERA

Following the turn of the millennium, even more indigenous authors began adding fresh voices and new characters to the growing chorus of native mysteries. In 2002, *DreadfulWater Shows Up*, by Thomas King writing as Hartley GoodWeather, introduced Thumps Dreadfulwater, a Cherokee ex-cop scratching a living as a photographer in the small town of Chinook. A comic mystery threaded with serious issues, *Kirkus* praised its author for his “unerring knack for converting social, racial, and economic conflict into blissful farce.” Goodweather was the playful pen name of leading Canadian author and scholar Thomas King, whose prior novels and children’s books had been shortlisted for two Governor General’s Awards, won the 1994 Canadian Authors Award, and was a runner-up for the Commonwealth Writers Prize.

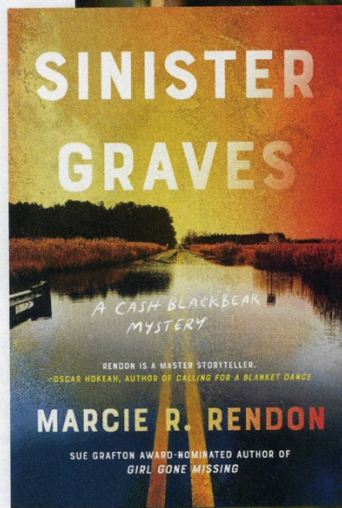
In 2003, two indigenous authors released novels illustrating the breadth of mystery and thriller writing. Sara Sue Hoklotubbe drew on her Oklahoma and Cherokee heritage when kickstarting her engaging Sadie Walela mystery series, which has won several regional awards, with *Deception on All Accounts*.

“Hollywood has spent decades trying to make up what they want Indian country to be like,” said Hoklotubbe in an interview earlier this year with *OsiyoTV*. “So, when I started writing, I wanted to make sure that I got it right, so it would in some small way educate people as to what it’s like to live in Cherokee country.”

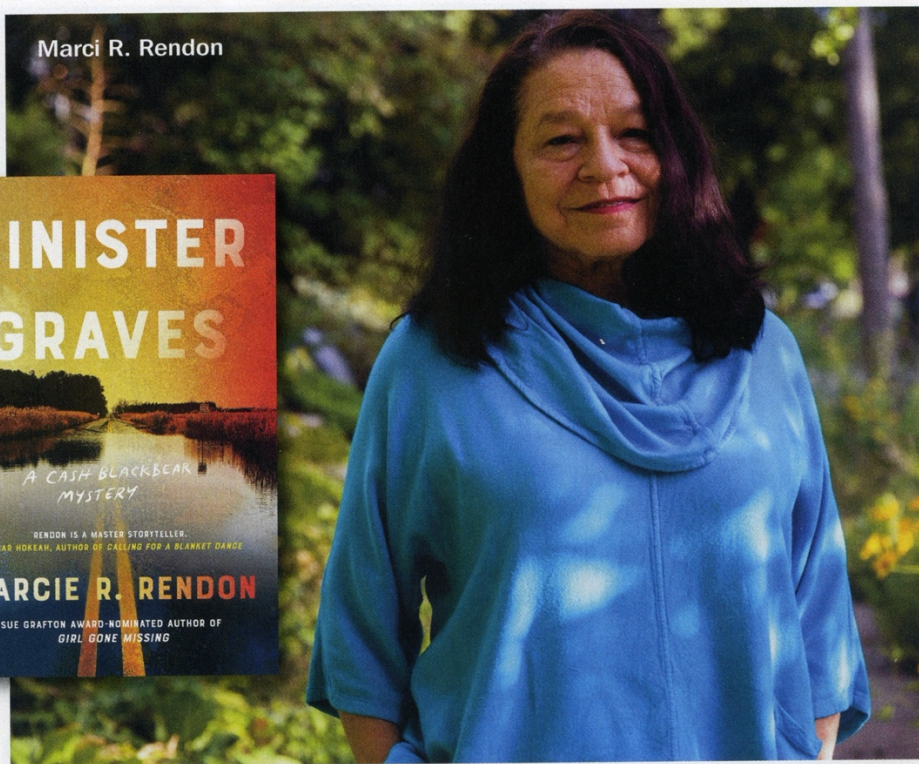
On the other end of the mystery spectrum where crime meshes with horror, Stephen Graham Jones published *All the Beautiful Sinners*, a complex tale of a Blackfeet deputy sheriff chasing a serial killer. Wanbli Weiden



Stephen Graham Jones



Marcie R. Rendon



calls it a landmark of Native suspense, that marks Jones as the native author who’s taken the baton from Louis Owens.

Over the coming years, further Native voices joined the mystery and thriller chorus. North of the border, *Fall From Grace* (2011) by Wayne Arthurson was a fine start to a gritty trilogy starring self-destructive Edmonton reporter Leo Desroches, who struggles with his ethnicity and personal life while delving into the murder of a young native woman. Chippewa author Louise Erdrich won a National Book Award for *The Round House* (2012), the story of a teenage boy on a North Dakota Reservation seeking revenge on his mother’s rapist.

Cherokee poet and author Linda Rodriguez won the 2011 St. Martin’s Press/Malice Domestic First Novel Competition for *Every Last Secret*, kickstarting a trilogy starring homicide detective turned campus security chief Marquitta “Skeet” Bannion. Recently, Thomas King’s two Hartley GoodWeather novels have been republished under his own name, and he’s resumed the Thumps Dreadfulwater series after a 12-year hiatus, with the sixth mystery, *Deep House*, published earlier this year. Prolific Abenaki storyteller Joseph Bruchac, who’s written more than 130 novels, children’s books, poetry, and story collections since the early 1970s, also began writing a series starring Abenaki private eye Jacob Neptune (*Padoskoks*, the second book, was published

in 2021) and Powwow Mystery picture books for children.

And five years ago, one of the brightest new stars emerged when Anishinabe poet and former counselor Marcie R. Rendon published *Murder on the Red River*, the first in her series starring teenage farm worker, pool hustler, and occasional crime-solver Cash Blackbear. Set among the sugar beet fields and small towns of North Dakota and Minnesota during the Vietnam War, it’s a superb slice of character-centric crime.

Talking with the DIY MFA podcast in 2020, Rendon said she didn’t have any agenda with her Cash Blackbear books. But by writing the tales from her own worldview, key issues naturally came through. “I’m just writing it, and that’s the story, the story of racism, the story of removal, the story of trafficking, the story of connection to the land, that’s all the Native existence.... It’s my lived experience. Those kinds of connections, that way of seeing the world.” ✦

Craig Sistorson is a lapsed attorney and lifelong mystery lover raised among Middle Earth scenery in New Zealand. He currently lives in London, writes for magazines in several countries, and is an event chair, festival founder, podcast host, and book awards judge. His first nonfiction book, Southern Cross Crime, was nominated for a 2021 Macavity Award. He’s the editor of the Dark Deeds Down Under anthology.