

# Native Indians Literature



North American Indians had a rich literature at the time of first contact with Europeans.



The principal genres of traditional literature were:

- **songs**, the equivalent of European lyric poems, which were often put to music before 1700,
- **tales**, which were very similar to European short narratives.

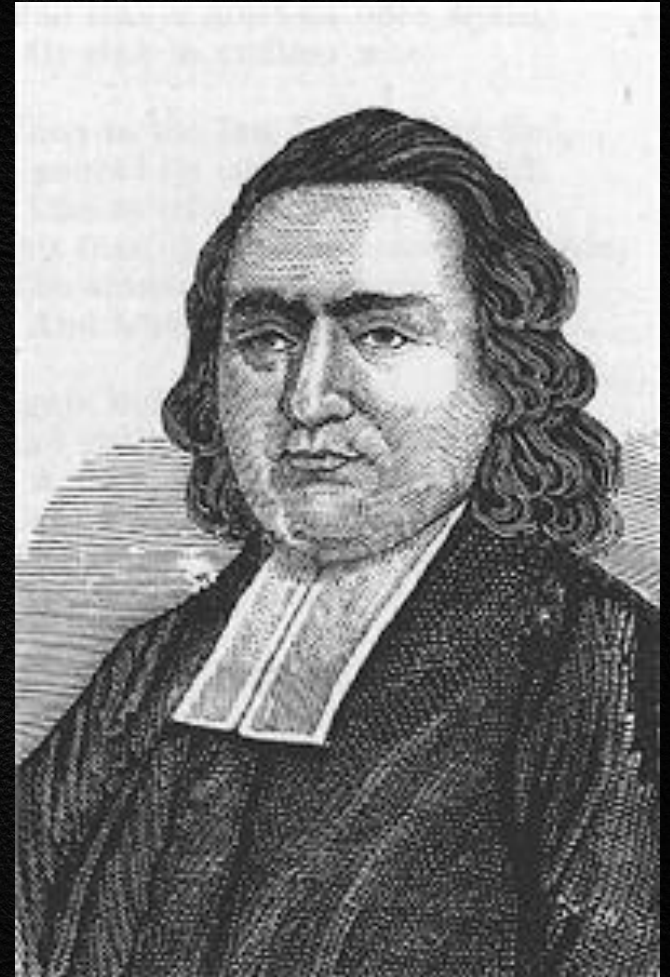
Indians continue to employ these forms today, especially in tribal settings.

But Indians who are professional authors in North America utilize the same genres as writers of other ethnic groups, that is,

- **fiction (the novel and short story),**
- **poetry,**
- **drama,**
- **and various forms of nonfiction.**



The first American  
Indian to publish a literary  
work in English was  
**Samson Occom** (Mohegan,  
1723–92) *A Sermon*  
*Preached at the Execution*  
*of Moses Paul.*



# Other early Indian writers of note

## were

- ❖ **Yellow Bird** (Cherokee, 1827–67) Yellow Bird, also known as John Rollin Ridge, *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta.*
- ❖ **Sarah Winnemucca** (Paiute, 1844–91) *Life among the Piutes* is a classic.
- ❖ **Alexander Posey** (Creek, 1873–1908). a poet and humorist. “Fus Fixico Letters” are appreciated as excellent examples of political satire.

# The 20<sup>th</sup> c. authors

In the first half of the 20th century, the major Indian writers were:

- Charles Eastman (Sioux, 1858–1939),
- John Joseph Mathews (Osage, 1894–1979),
- D'Arcy McNickle (Cree, Flathead, 1904–77).

# Charles Eastman (Sioux, 1858–1939)

- was active in early pan-Indian movements
- had a good deal of influence as a public intellectual.
- reworked traditional Sioux tales for white audiences, cleaning up the racier ones to make them appropriate for children.





# John Joseph Mathews's

writings were often a surprise to readers of his time, who generally viewed Indians as hapless, impoverished victims.



# D'Arcy McNickle



his work represents the highwater mark of Indian literary achievement before the American Indian Literary Renaissance that began in the late 1960s.

*The Surrounded* (1936), a story of the encroachment of Euro-American culture on the Indians living on the Flathead Reservation in northern Montana.

*The novel has the mood and power of a Greek tragedy.*

# The Renaissance of Indian American Literature

The 1960s, a decade of dramatic cultural and political upheaval in the United States, ushered in a renaissance in American Indian culture



In the work *Native American Literatures: An Introduction*, author Suzanne Lundquist suggests the Native American Renaissance has three elements:

- Reclamation of heritage through literary expression;
- Discovery and reevaluation of early texts by Native American authors; and
- Renewed interest in customary tribal artistic expression (i.e. mythology, ceremonialism, ritual, and the oral tradition of narrative transmission).

*The characteristics of Renaissance writers are as follows:*

- devotion to a sacred landscape;
- a homing-in plot, often associated with a protagonist's return to the reservation;
- the treatment of a mixed-blood protagonist's dilemma between two worlds as a central theme;
- were often concerned with writing for a non-Native audience;

# N. Scott Momaday

The renaissance in Native American culture began almost concurrently with the publication of Momaday's House Made of Dawn and The Way to Rainy Mountain.

Rainy Mountain is a highly poetic memoir and brief history of the Kiowa.



- was born in Lawton, *Oklahoma* on February 27, 1934, and grew up in close contact with *the Navajo and San Carlos Apache communities*.
- received his BA in political science in 1958 from the University of New Mexico.
- at Stanford University he received his MA and PhD in English
- worked as the Professor in the Universities.
- his novel *House Made of Dawn* led to the breakthrough of Native American literature into the American mainstream after the novel was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1969.



N. SCOTT MOMADAY  
HOUSE  
MADE OF  
DAWN



# an Indian Who Wrote About the Plains



wrote principally about the **Blackfeet of his native Montana.**

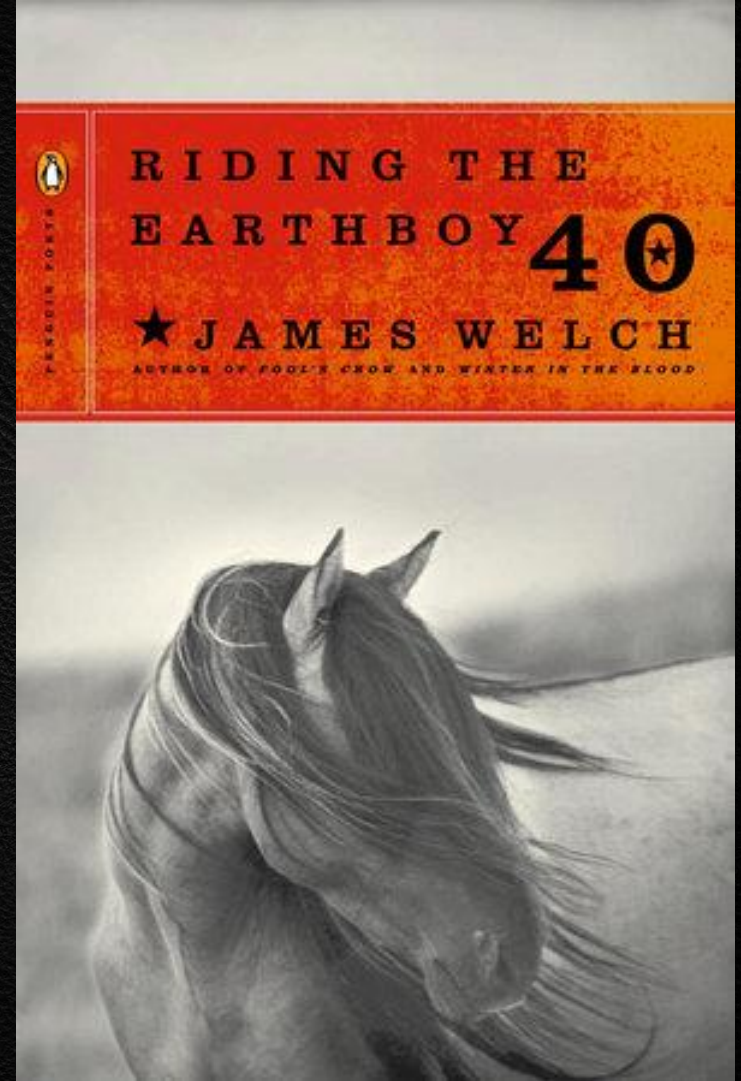
as did Momaday, Welch published poetry before he turned to **fiction**, although his first collection of **poems,**

*Riding the Earth Boy* 40 (1975), came out a year after his first novel, *Winter in the Blood*.

- grew up on an Indian reservation, determined to become a writer and put into words the stresses on a people left out of the American dream.
- won wide notice, especially in Europe, with fiction based on real life, including "Winter in the Blood" and "The Death of Jim Loney", "Fools Crow", and "The Indian Lawyer".
- Having composed some poetry in high school, Mr. Welch studied English literature at the University of Montana in Missoula
- His first book of poetry, "Riding the Earthboy Forty", dealt with the landscape, people and history he grew up with.
- The author described himself as both an "Indian writer" and "an Indian who writes,"

The title of the book refers to the forty acres of Montana land Welch's father once leased from a Blackfeet family called Earthboy.

This land and its surroundings shaped the writer's worldview as a youth, its rawness resonates in the vitality of his elegant poetry, and his verse shows a great awareness of a moment in time, of a place in nature, and of the human being in context.



# Contemporary Indian fiction

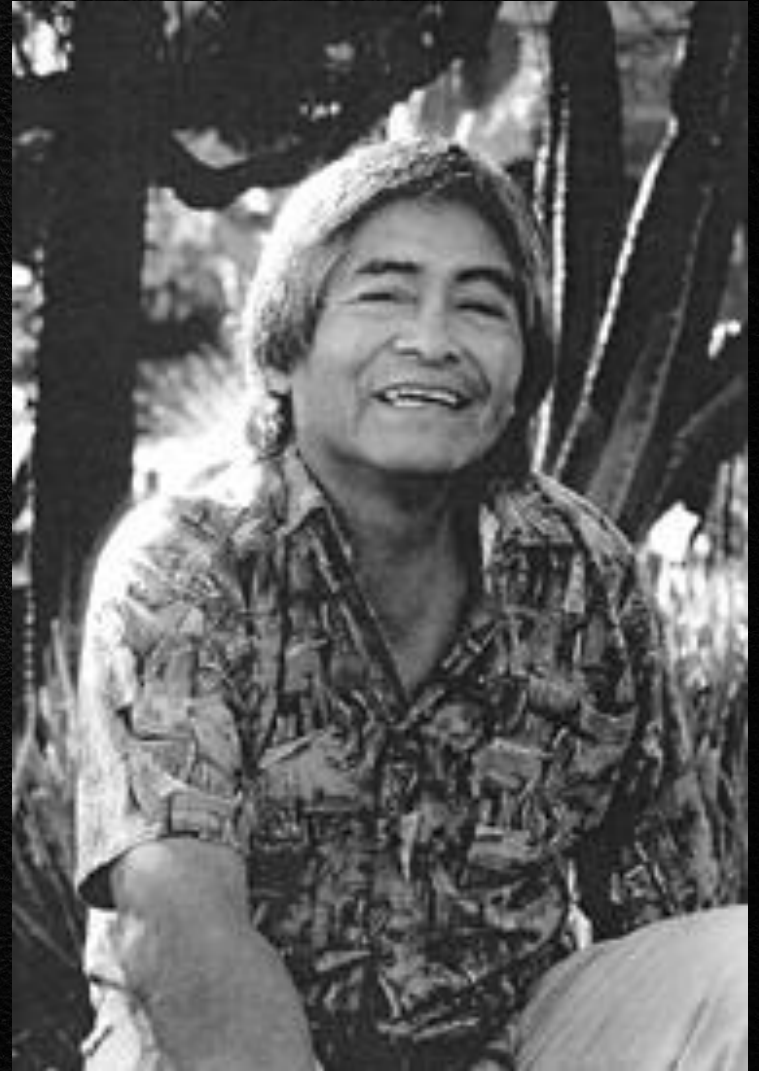
has chronicled the fortunes of the Indians as they trade the miseries of poverty on the reservation for the anxieties of the urban business world.

the leading Indian poets today are probably Simon Ortiz (Acoma, 1941– ) and Joy Harjo (Muscogee Creek, 1951– ).

# Simon Ortiz

**Ortiz** writes intensely political poetry, presenting a running critique of American history, primarily focusing on Indian-white relations.

His short poems are history lessons from the underside of the American experience, Ortiz's verse is sharp, but not bitter; ultimately he strikes a hopeful tone.



Despite the grim events of the 19th century, Ortiz does not think of whites as the other: He very much considers himself an American. As he puts it in an epigraph to *from Sand Creek* (1981):

*This America  
has been a burden  
of steel and mad  
death,  
but look now,  
there are flowers  
and new grass  
and a spring wind  
rising  
from Sand Creek.*

