

The First Two Pages of “Skin” by David Heska Wanbli Weiden

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An Essay by David Heska Wanbli Weiden

A two-hundred-year-old book bound in the flesh of a murdered Native American man. I’d been wanting to write about this for years, and, happily, I was given the opportunity to do so when contacted by Abby Vandiver and asked to contribute a story to the *Midnight Hour* anthology. However, I was more than a little daunted as I hadn’t drafted a new short story for a long time. After working exclusively on my debut novel, *Winter Counts* (Ecco, 2020), for a number of years, I was afraid that my short story chops—if, indeed, I had ever possessed such—had faded away and vanished.

To refresh my knowledge of the form, I returned to an essay by Flannery O’Connor, “Writing Short Stories” (in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*), that I’d read long ago. In the piece, O’Connor states, “However, to say that fiction proceeds by the use of detail does not mean the simple, mechanical piling-up of detail. Detail has to be controlled by some overall purpose, and every detail has to be put to work for you. Art is selective. What is there is essential and creates movement.”

Obviously, in a short story, the author has limited space to describe the setting of the story and introduce the characters. As O’Connor notes, every detail is

important and contributes to the movement of the story. Thus, my task in the opening paragraphs of “Skin” was to portray the setting of the Rosebud Indian Reservation and convey what it’s like to live there. I’m aware that most of my readers have likely never visited a Native reservation, and so it was critical to provide those details concisely but with an eye to the larger movement of the piece.

Here are the opening paragraphs of “Skin”:

“You want the usual, Virgil?”

I nodded and put three dollars on the counter. The barista set the cup down in front of me. *Pejuta sapa. Black medicine* in Lakota. The coffee was good, strong but not bitter. The place had opened up a few years ago, the first coffee shop on the Rosebud reservation. Now we had four restaurants, not counting the food truck that served burritos and tacos out by the grocery store—Rapper’s Delight Tacos, all their items named after hip-hop artists: Snoop Dog Nachos, 2Pac Carnitas, the Biggie Burrito. I liked their stuff, but nine bucks for three greasy tacos was a little steep for the rez.

I took a seat out on the patio and settled in. A few cars passed by, no one I knew. I thought about heading out and joining my friend Tommy at the fast-pitch game. His team, the Rez Sox, were playing a crew from the Pine Ridge reservation, the Wild Oglalas. The games were usually pretty laid-back, but I knew there might be some tension tonight, given the traditional rivalry between the Sicangu and Oglala tribes, so I had promised Tommy I’d stop by. I was wondering if I had time to order a brownie when my cell phone buzzed.

In just over two hundred words, I attempted to show the economic deprivation that exists on the Rosebud reservation by noting that there are only four restaurants and one food truck in an area that’s the size of the state of Delaware. In addition, the main character Virgil Wounded Horse muses on the fact that nine dollars for a meal is too expensive for the reservation.

I also brought in some Lakota language to orient the reader to the setting. I used a less common Lakota term for coffee—pejuta sapa—in the story and made the choice to use that somewhat outdated term, rather than the more common word, wakalyapi (sometimes spelled wakalapi or wakhalapi). I felt the older term had a better rhythm and also possessed an echo/resonance to the phrase Paha Sapa, which is the Lakota name for the Black Hills of South Dakota, which are considered sacred by our people.

The description of the Rapper’s Delight Tacos food truck was also deliberate, as I wanted to demonstrate the modernity of Indigenous peoples. Yes, Native teenagers listen to rap music, play video games, and watch sports, just like young people everywhere. Also, truth be told, I’ve been wanting to write about the hip-hop food truck on the reservation for a long time, which really exists, although I made up the establishment’s name and menu items.

Finally, in the second full paragraph of the story, I note the “traditional rivalry between the Sicangu and Oglala tribes” in the context of a fast-pitch softball game. This detail foreshadows the end of the story, when there’s a violent conflict between Virgil and his friend Tommy, who are both members of the Sicangu Lakota Nation, and the security guard Lonnie, who’s a citizen of the Oglala Nation, which is located just to the west of the Rosebud reservation.

That paragraph ends with Virgil’s cell phone ringing, which introduces the inciting incident of the story. On the phone is Virgil’s attorney, Charley Leader Charge, who requests that Virgil drive to Rapid City to the Hampton Theological Seminary and steal the horrific book that’s bound in the skin of a murdered Indigenous man and which has been prominently displayed by the school for decades. In a novel, I wouldn’t introduce the inciting incident so early, but it’s necessary to do so in the short form.

There is no “Hampton Theological Seminary” in reality, but I deliberately used the word *Hampton* in the fictional school’s name as a nod to the Hampton Agricultural and Industrial School in Virginia, which was the model for the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, one of the earliest and most notorious boarding schools for Native American children. At these boarding schools, Native children were stripped of their culture and frequently beaten and abused. Indeed, Virgil learns later in the story that the fictional Hampton School was once a boarding school for Indigenous children.

It’s important to note that the central construct of the story—a book bound in Native skin—is based upon a real event in Colorado. Here are the opening remarks from the Redskin, Tanned Hide Conference, held in 2019 in Denver: “In 1893, Iliff School of Theology took into its library a book, given as a gift, written in Latin that is a History of Christianity. It was covered by the skin of a murdered Indian

man. It was treasured by the institution and displayed for 80 years in a case outside of the Library. In 1974, under pressure from students, the book was taken out of public view and in the presence of a representative of the American Indian Movement, the skin cover was removed and repatriated. Everyone present that day were sworn to secrecy and required to sign non-disclosure agreements”

(<https://www.iliff.edu/redskin/>). Because this historical incident is quite obscure, I wanted to write about the history of that appalling book, albeit in fictional form. I’m pleased to make the connection between the historical event and my story in this essay, and I urge interested readers to seek out the several academic articles that have been written by scholars about the history of the book.

I’ll close this essay by briefly discussing the title of the story. For those who don’t know, the term *redskin* is considered to be offensive and an insult by most Indigenous people, and yet the word *skin* has been appropriated by younger Natives, who use the word as a term of affection. Obviously, I was drawn to the double meaning of the word for the title, as well as the fact that Virgil and Lonnie have epiphanies at the end of the story and acknowledge their common bond and humanity. I hope that Virgil, Tommy, and Lonnie’s tale both entertains and illuminates, and makes some progress towards the central goal of the short-story writer, which is, according to Flannery O’Connor, to “reveal as much of the mystery of existence as possible.”

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David Heska Wanbli Weiden, an enrolled citizen of the Sicangu Lakota Nation, is the author of *Winter Counts*, nominated for an Edgar Award, and winner of the Anthony, Thriller, Lefty, Barry, Macavity, Spur, High Plains, Tillie Olsen, and Electa Quinney Awards. The novel was a *New York Times* Editors' Choice, an Indie Next pick, main selection of the Book of the Month Club, and named a Best Book of 2020 by NPR, Amazon, *Publishers Weekly*, *Library Journal*, *The Guardian*, and other magazines. The novel is being translated into French, German, Japanese, Turkish, and Polish, and has been optioned for film production. He has short stories appearing or forthcoming in the crime fiction anthologies *Denver Noir*, *Midnight Hour*, *This Time for Sure*, and *The Perfect Crime*. Weiden is the recipient of a MacDowell Fellowship, a Ragdale Foundation residency, the PEN America Writing for Justice Fellowship, and was a Tin House Scholar. He received his MFA degree from the Institute of American Indian Arts, and lives in Denver, Colorado, with his family.