From the Elders to the Bow
The Creative Circle of Joseph M. Marshall III

Owen Wister Award

Named after Owen Wister, author of *The Virginian* and considered the “father” of the Western story, the Owen Wister Award is presented to a living author for lifetime achievement in Western history and literature. The recipient is automatically inducted into the Western Writers Hall of Fame, which is housed outside the McCracken Research Library at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming.

By Candy Moulton

The boy sat with his grandfather and the other old men under a cottonwood tree in the 1950s, choosing to listen to their stories rather than to join others his age in a game. He would often do that, sit quietly and listen. These old men spoke in their own language, Lakota, but that didn’t matter to the boy, he lived with his grandparents and it was his first language.

Joseph M. Marshall III, an Oglala/Sicangu Lakota, grew up on the Rosebud Indian Reservation, 10 miles southwest of White River, South Dakota, on his grandmother’s land. They lived in a log cabin she had built. His playground was 160 acres, and he had a couple of dogs and a horse. His grandparents had a wagon that they used for transportation any time they left the cabin, unless they walked. The cabin had no running water or electricity, so they hauled water for cooking, or to take a bath.

When the boy went to school, at about age 8, he was the oldest in the kindergarten class, and barely spoke any English.

But this boy, who liked listening to the stories of his elders, did fine in school. Many of the other children spoke Lakota and some English, so they learned together.

Stories always entertained Joe and eventually he would write his own, recounting the tales he had learned as a boy – always drawing from his Lakota culture for inspiration. This year, Joseph M. Marshall III is the 2023 Owen Wister Award recipient for lifetime contributions to Western Literature.

“This award, I know Scott Momaday and other Native writers have received it,” Marshall said. “But I want the Western Writers to know that what I appreciate is recognizing the Native voice, recognizing the indigenous writer.”

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“The old man cleared his throat ….
Life is a circle like all of these stones.
Look at the sun. It is round, a circle,
and so is the moon. Drop a stone in a pond, and you see circles grow. The seasons go in a circle: winter, spring, summer, and autumn, over and over.
When we pray, we start by facing west, where the Great Powers live; then we turn north, then east, then south. We show our respect to all our relatives by moving in a circle.”


Among his accomplishments in bringing the Lakota story to diverse audiences, Marshall has written novels, history, essays and newspaper columns. He has worked in film, both as a cultural adviser to producers and screenwriters and as an actor. He cofounded a college for tribal members and has instructed young Lakotas in traditional skills.

Marshall, whose books include *The Journey of Crazy Horse: A Lakota History* and the Spur Award finalist long novel *The Long Knives are Crying*, has spoken at a WWA convention where, during one panel on “Writing from the Indian Viewpoint,” he said pinning down an Indian viewpoint is no simple matter.

“What is the Indian perspective?” he said. “I don’t know. There are over two million of us in this country. That’s how many perspectives there are.”

Joseph M. Marshall III at the Hatch, New Mexico, home, where he has been recovering from a recent illness. Johnny D. Boggs
Joe Marshall on the Wister Award

"After reading the list of past honorees for the Owen Wister Award, I am profoundly humbled and honored to be included. My initial reaction upon receiving the news from my friends Kirk Ellis and Win Blevins was one of disbelief, and it still is to some extent. Nonetheless, I am extremely grateful for this recognition and I will always treasure this moment in my life.

“It’s somewhat difficult to accept that my first book was published 31 years ago, and it was after dreaming of that moment for many, many years. I decided to become a writer as a young adult and took some time to learn the craft of writing, which I am still learning. The release of my first book – coauthored with two friends – was a dream come true, at a time when I was past young adulthood. Receiving the Owen Wister Award at this time in my life is an affirmation for me that I pursued the right dream.

“I humbly express my appreciation to the Western Writers of America for this honor, and to all of you who made it possible. And just as importantly, for recognizing an indigenous voice which is an important and necessary part of all the stories.

“Lila pilamayaya pelo (I thank you very much).”

– Joseph M. Marshall III

That’s Joe, direct and to the point.

During that same panel he told the audience of mostly non-Indian writers: “You have not lived our culture, so how can you write realistically about it – unless you get to know our history and culture as well as you can?” The best way to understand indigenous culture, he said, is to talk to and learn from Indian people. But he added a warning: “There are 60,000 Lakota and not all know their history. Remember this.”

Joe is one who does know the culture and the history. Like the elders he learned from, he is a story-keeper – and one who writes and speaks with authority.

He has that authority because of the “fortunate consequence of how I grew up, having access to those older people wanting to tell their stories.

“As I look back on it the positive aspect of having this close relationship with my grandparents, it put me in touch with people of their generation, their relatives and friends.” Those people were the elders of the tribe, and from them Marshall heard a lot of stories.

“I loved those stories, so when you like something, you ask for it again. Tell me it again, tell me that story again,” Marshall said. That repetition of story is the tenant of oral history.

“It was the motivation and the mechanism to remember it.”

The Confusion of History

The history Joe learned from his grandparents and their friends was not the same history he was taught in school.

“I like history. I always have because of the stories my grandparents and their generation talked about,” he said. But the history he was taught in school came from “a whole different perspective,” he said. “I didn’t like it at all. I recall a history
The movies come calling

By Candy Moulton

Still in Casper, Wyoming, in 1990, Joseph M. Marshall III’s life was about to take a spin in a new direction.

Marshall was working as executive director of the local Red Cross chapter when a film producer heard of Marshall’s knowledge of Lakota culture and ability to speak the language. The producer wanted Marshall to join the production of Lakota Moon as a technical adviser.

“I decided then and there to take the job, and haven’t looked back since,” Marshall said.

The film, written by John Wilder and directed by Christopher Cain, starred Rodney Grant, Gordon Tootoosis, Casey Camp-Horinek and Zahn McClarnon.

Marshall’s next experience with film production soon followed, when he was cast in a nonspeaking role as a warrior in Return to Lonesome Dove, based on characters from Larry McMurtry’s novel Lonesome Dove. The part came about at the suggestion of Wilder, who wrote the TV miniseries’ script. And it was a part of Marshall’s education in film.

Making movies is “another way of telling a story,” Marshall points out. “There are good movies and there are bad movies.” Filmmaking is a lot of “hurry up and waiting,” he said. “A lot of making a movie is organized chaos.”

“I’ll never forget my first encounter with Joe,” said Kirk Ellis, who won a Spur Award for an episode of Into the West (Turner Network Television). Marshall worked on the 2005 miniseries as technical adviser, narrator and actor.

“It was the first day of shooting in Santa Fe. The schedule called for a full-on re-enactment of the Sand Creek Massacre with hundreds of extras and 10 cameras, and the mood was understandably grim. Walking across our location on the San Cristobal Ranch, I caught sight of this impressive figure on a nearby hilltop waving a bundle of sage to the four directions to purify the site.

“That was Joe. Though we’d been in touch by phone and e-mail several times in his capacity as historical adviser, we’d never actually met. As I made my way up that hill, Joe’s presence only gained in stature. He’s physically imposing, to say the least, but he also carries with him a profound spiritual strength. Joe takes his role as a Lakota elder and teacher very seriously and infuses his knowledge of and passion for his people into everything he writes. He is truly someone who has ‘walked in both worlds.’”

Ellis added: “Joe and I got to be close collaborators and good friends during those many months of production back in 2005. He taught me a great deal about the importance of oral narrative as history. His ability to see the West from an alternate perspective is a gift few of us can rightfully claim, and his gentle suggestions made the material infinitely better. Seeing him that late fall day, a proud and confident Lakota blessing the work we were about to do, I could only think with some relief, ‘Man, am I glad he liked the script.’”

Playing Loved by the Buffalo in Into the West was Marshall’s first acting role.

“I was terrified that I would come across very unauthentically,” Marshall recalls. “The basic thing is the role I was technically, culturally advising, Marshall said one thing was evident: “You had to be a strong enough person and personality to make a point to a director or producer, or even an actor.”

book, at White River, fourth grade, history of South Dakota, 120 pages long, full of pictures about pioneers, log cabins, there was mention about Natives, but only about a page and a half.”

This lack of information and perspective about the American Indian stories of the region left Joe confused and suspicious. “I didn’t know what to do about it,” he said. “There were other Native kids in the classes, but mostly it was white kids, so it was hard. I figured they believed what was being taught.” And the behavior of the white students added to the confusion as it was obvious to Joe that they had an “attitude of manifest destiny. You could see it in those white kids.”

By the time he was in high school, Joe’s confusion remained, but he found purpose. “I knew I wanted to write. I knew I wanted to tell stories. I knew my grandparents and their generation were really good storytellers. That kind of oral story telling was a dying thing. As I got older, there were fewer and fewer people who were doing that and fewer and fewer young people who were willing to listen. So, writing them was the next best thing.”

One of the essays he recalls writing during that period was about the assassination of John F. Kennedy. He was a senior in high school at the time. It would take years for him to hone his craft.

Marshall’s books Soldiers Falling into Camp: The Battles at the Rosebud and the Little Big Horn (1992, written with Robert Kammen and Frederick Lefthand); Winter of the Holy Iron (1994); and On Behalf

“Joseph Marshall’s brilliant writing has provided a beautiful and intimate portrait of Lakota culture,” said W. Michael and Kathleen O’Neal Gear, the 2021 Owen Wister Award recipients. “His contribution to the growing voice of Lakota literature cannot be overstated. He has illuminated and educated the world.”

Joe’s humble childhood gave him a foundation that he has stood on throughout his life.

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And then there are the lessons of the bow.

Marshall describes it this way:

“Like everything else in my childhood, I learned from my grandparents, my grandfather especially. When I was 4 or 5, he pulled a box from under his bed and he opened it. I saw a short bow and four arrows with iron points on them, and that fascinated me. Later on, he made another one and he demonstrated how to use it, but it was so stout I couldn’t pull it back, so I asked him to make one for me. So, he did.

“I was totally fascinated by it. I learned how to shoot it.

“The one thing that I realized as a young adult was that making a bow is a life itself. It’s transformational change, it’s fulfilling the purpose. The one aspect that is very profound for me: In order to make a bow, we have to kill a tree.

“Because we have the audacity to take the life of a tree, then we owe the tree the best effort to make the best bow we can from that tree that we could. The whole aspect of transforming something that you killed, that is now dead, into something that is useful and has a good purpose. That’s really what life is all about.

“Every time I shoot a bow, see an arrow fly that I make, is an experience of life.”

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Marshall attended college as a double major in social studies and English. He taught in South Dakota, where he “learned early on that teaching wasn’t for me, it’s a lot of work. I wasn’t really committed to spending a lot of years in the classroom.”

He traveled across the Dakotas and Nebraska, providing technical assistance, grant writing and administration for tribal travel and community action programs. He learned how tribal governments functioned and about tribal politics.

In 1986, Marshall was in Casper, Wyoming, working for the American Heart Association when his first opportunity to write for a public audience came from an editor at the Casper Star-Tribune.

“I had been writing things for myself, short stories, just because I felt the urge to write. I had material and I was doing the function of writing, so it was a very natural thing. I made friends with a letters’ editor for the Casper Star-Tribune, and she invited me to write a monthly column for the paper.”

This was a spark he needed, and he began writing in earnest, drawing from the stories he had heard from the elders.

The pages filled with words and Marshall filled shelves with his own books. They included The Journey of Crazy Horse: A Lakota History; Hundred in the Hand, the story of the 1866 Fetterman battle; and The Day the World Ended at Little Bighorn, which won the PEN/Beyond Margins Award. The Long Knives are Crying, a novel about the Battle of the Little Big Horn, was a 2009 Spur Award finalist for Best Western Long Novel.

Books about Lakota beliefs, customs and spirituality include The Lakota Way: Stories and Lessons for Living, a finalist for the PEN Center USA West Award in 2002; Walking with

College founder

It is not enough for Joseph M. Marshall III to know and write about his culture. While he no longer teaches in a high school or college classroom, he is a profound educator. He has taught the art of bowmaking to young people for Lakota Youth Development on the Rosebud Reservation, and he was one of the founders of Sinte Gleske University, one of the first three tribal colleges in the United States.

The Elders at Rosebud wanted an institution where young Indian students could study and earn a degree, without the need to leave the reservation. Sinte Gleske University “changed lives for a lot of native young people,” Marshall said. The university initially had basic courses in social studies and science in part because it depended on who was available in the area who could teach. Marshall returned to the classroom to provide instruction in Native history, language and culture.

It was a seminal idea, with tribal colleges also developed at Pine Ridge on the Oglala Lakota Reservation and on the Navajo Nation in New Mexico and Arizona. The movement caught on. Today there are 38 Indian colleges.

– Candy Moulton
Literary travels with Joe Marshall

By Page Lambert


I first discovered Marshall’s writing when researching the novel Shifting Stars. I was living on our small family ranch in the Bear Lodge Mountains, a forested section of the Black Hills that extends west into Wyoming. I hiked that land more often than I rode it, but whether on foot or horseback, I always returned to the house hungry to know more about the people whose stories and lives surrounded mine – from Sun Dance Mountain to the east; to Inyan Kara to the south; to the Bear’s Lodge to the west. These placenames speak to the presence of the Lakota People about whom Marshall so eloquently writes.

Turning to Marshall’s books for guidance, from Soldiers Falling Into Camp, to Winter of the Holy Iron, to The Journey of Crazy Horse, to the stories in The Dance House, I began to understand why the Black Hills, the land where I was rearing my own son and daughter, was known to the Lakota People as the “heart of all things.”

Marshall’s books tied me to the land and gave me the courage to believe that the place where two stories meet – where lives and histories intersect – is a sacred place. I am grateful that part of my heart will always belong to Paha Sapa, and grateful to Marshall for being the keeper of those stories.

Joe Marshall’s words

A sampling of Joseph M. Marshall III’s writings:

“The old ones liked to say that there are many strange and mysterious things in this world. They knew this to be true because they had seen things: some wondrous, some funny, some powerful or small. But everything has a purpose, they said, everything that happens is a gift from life itself, if for nothing else than to teach us a lesson.”


“Being strong means to cling to hope for one more heartbeat, one more sunrise …”

– Keep Going: The Art of Perseverance (Sterling Ethos, 2006)

Speaking about Joe Marshall

“Joseph Marshall III has spent his entire life educating Natives and non-Natives about Lakota history, culture, and knowledge. He accepted this challenge wholeheartedly. When someone asks me for a good book to read, it is usually The Dance House Stories from the Rosebud. It is good to know a man and an author walking his talk. Joseph Marshall III, whose heart is in his writing, well deserves the Wister Award.”

– John Gritts, Cherokee artist and career public servant for tribal universities and students
By Kirk Ellis

Joseph M. Marshall III could build a fire from scratch using only wet wood. But when it came time to cook breakfast the next morning — he preferred to borrow my propane Coleman stove.

For a week in September 2016, I shared a campsite on the banks of the Cannonball River with Joe and his nephew Lewis Goodvoice Eagle. Our site offered a panoramic overview of the Oceti Sakowin camp, one of the largest gatherings of Indian Nations ever assembled. Tribes had arrived from all over the country, as well as from New Zealand and Australia, in solidarity with the Standing Rock Lakota to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), which had already desecrated sacred land and threatened the water supply.

Throughout that time of solidarity and protests, I accompanied Joe and Lewis as they navigated the ever-expanding assembly, which came to resemble a pan-Indian metropolis. We attended rallies, participated in a Native American Church wedding (a first for all of us), witnessed the repatriation of a sacred pipe and shared a final-night ritual sweat lodge with other self-described “water protectors.”

Most memorable were the evening fire circles. As we warmed ourselves and sipped from tin teacups, Joe reflected on the history being made and related stories of his grandmother, Lulu Lodgeskins, a small woman with a deep voice who once cured with native medicine a horse bitten in the face by a rattlesnake. She lived to the age of 101, and Joe credited her for instilling the love and respect for Lakota tradition that informs his work as a writer, teacher and elder.

I cherish every moment of that week (except for the bitter cold nights, which Joe and Lewis weathered under buffalo robes that put my “all-temperature” sleeping bag to shame). And I will never forget our final morning together. We stood on the far bank of the Cannonball River, watching silently as mist rose over the water and amber morning light spread across the waking Oceti Sakowin camp. Wisps of campfire smoke rose from countless firepits. Dwellings of every type — trailers, wikkiups, tipis — stretched far into the horizon.

“There hasn’t been anything like this in my lifetime,” Joe reflected. Unshielded by his reflective sunglasses, Joe’s eyes revealed a deep sense of pride; it was hard not to be moved to tears. Joe told me that the sheer numbers at Standing Rock far exceeded those of the last great Native American gathering on the Greasy Grass in June 1876, when Lakotas, Cheyennes and Arapahos banded together to teach George Armstrong Custer and the U.S. Army a fatal lesson. “Nothing will be the same for our people after this,” Joe predicted.

As usual, Joe was right. DAPL may have been built, but a whole generation of Native American activists, inspired by elders like Joe and electrified by their experience, have taken the lessons learned at Standing Rock to their homelands, where they continue to fight — successfully these days — for their people’s rights and futures.

Says Joe: “They’re ready for everything.”

View across the Cannonball River.
Kirk Ellis