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# BLACKFEET DIFFERENCE

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**LEDFEATHER**
Stephen Graham Jones
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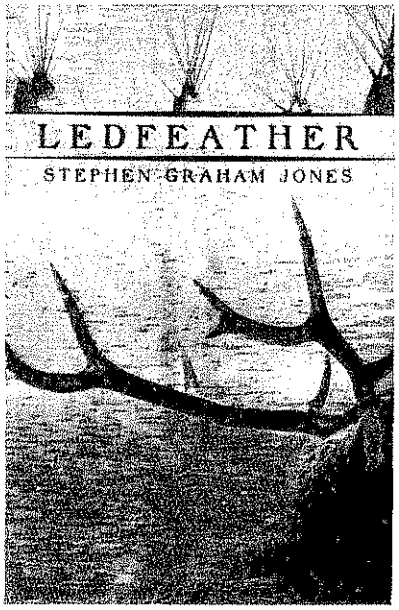
The Marias/Baker Massacre and the Winter of 1884 are pivotal, defining moments in the history and literature of the Blackfeet Nation, a nation that occupied what is today Montana in the US and Alberta in Canada. A nomadic people who followed and depended on the buffalo for their livelihood, the Blackfeet's decline began in 1870 when US cavalrymen surrounded the Blackfeet winter campsite near the Marias River, killing some two hundred Piegans (a tribe within the Blackfeet Nation), most of whom were the elderly, women, or children. The decline culminated in the Winter of 1884 when the Blackfeet people found themselves berefted of the buffalo, who had become nearly extinct, and at the brink of starvation, cutting the population by half. Left devastated and destituted, they turned to the US government's Indian Agency for food. For many Blackfeet, this winter is a symbol not only of their decline but also of their conquest by the US and Canada. And just as the internment has become the central theme and focus in Japanese American literature, the Marias/Baker Massacre and the Winter of 1884 dominate Blackfeet literature, posing the question of the condition of possibility of survival after such traumatic historical experiences.

James Welch (1940–2003) is the most prominent Blackfeet author, and all of his novels concern contemporary Blackfeet life on the Fort Belknap and Blackfeet reservations and the surrounding towns, with the Massacre and the Winter of 1884 in the background. In his masterpiece *Fools Crow* (1986), Welch reconstructs the Blackfeet Nation's history, life, and culture before and after the Marias/Baker Massacre, the Winter of 1884, and the subsequent American conquest and colonization. His classic *Winter in the Blood* (1974) concerns a contemporary nameless, Blackfeet narrator who struggles to survive, after the winter deaths of his father and brother. The narrator's struggle reaches a resolution when his now elderly, speechless grandmother, who survives the Winter of 1884 and who earlier gives him fragments of that history, dies, and he later learns of his grandfather and his Blackfeet family history.

Blackfeet writer Stephen Graham Jones, in *Ledfeather*, revisits Welch's contemporary Blackfeet Reservation and the surrounding towns, but he does it not with the realism of Welch—a genre that gives the illusion that it really is the real, the truth—but with the postmodern or metafictional play of difference of Chippewa Gerald Vizenor, Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, Ishmael Reed, John Barth, David Foster Wallace, and others. (Many of Jones's other novels such as *The Bird is Gone* [2003] and *The Fast Red Road* [2000] have a Vizenor-like, metafictional play.) *Ledfeather* poignantly tells the deep, humane, complex, and heartfelt story of the Blackfeet Nation as its subjects endure life, death, love, humor, decline, and survival. Understanding clearly that language (and the novel) cannot master its subject, Jones in *Ledfeather* riskily but successfully plays with this almost sacred Blackfeet history. He gives us a fragmented, chapter-less, multi-voiced, non-chronological, multigenre narrative, which constantly reminds the reader that it is fiction unsuccessfully trying to capture the Blackfeet story. In giving us a kind of panoramic linguistic disruption of the traditional novel through his play with a number of its conventions, especially the insertion of the letters into the middle of the text, Jones exposes the novel as a linguistic construct. But the brilliance of *Ledfeather* is Jones's ability to effectively and subtly demonstrate how we can only know the past except as it is mediated through language, which is imprecise, without diminishing the power and the tragedy of the Blackfeet story.

The main protagonist, Doby Saxon, is a contemporary Blackfeet whose life is out of control. We receive fragments of his story from various narrators and from different viewpoints. All are limited and all are beautifully rendered. There is the white female narrator whose "words" Doby cannot understand, and she cannot "translate" his words. The white couple, who has been married for "thirty-eight years," do not know him but are trying to save him. There is Little Step, the sixth grader, and the young, female high-school freshperson who give the reader information about Doby that they do not fully understand. From these disparate narratives, the reader provisionally has to piece together Doby's life. He grows up in a dysfunctional family where the mother is either at the casino where she is "drunk and disorderly" or is in jail, and the father is either away or is also in jail. They tell Doby nothing about being Blackfeet. But, Doby receives love from his aunt who tells him the truth, as she knows it. He begins smoking and drinking before his teens, and as the novel opens, Doby is standing in the middle of the road at night waiting for a car to hit him. Unhappy with his life and distraught with the death of his best friend, Jamie, he is trying to commit suicide. This first attempt fails. Later, as he sits in the snow by the side of the road, "[w]aiting for another car to come kill him," he begins to read Frances Dalimpere's letters, which he holds onto as if "they were the most important thing in the world." "All the papers [letters and notes] Doby Saxon had been gathering were in his lap, and he was reading in his stupid way, where his lips followed what was on the page."




***The brilliance of* Ledfeather *is Jones's ability to effectively and subtly demonstrate how we can only know the past except through the mediation of language.***

In these tormentingly beautiful letters, written mostly in the 1880s, in simplistic and elegant prose, to his wife, Claire, who never receives them, Dalimpere, the US government's Indian Agent on the Blackfeet Reservation, tells a tender, sad, and, at times, hopelessly, complex human story (which is full of life) about missing his wife, his attempt to save one Blackfeet boy, who wanted to stone himself to death, his realization that his predecessor Collins has mismanaged affairs on the reservation, and his conversations with Yellow Tail, who tells him of the beautiful magical, nomadic culture and the torturous and declining history of the Blackfeet Nation, including the Marias/Baker Massacre, the smallpox epidemic, and the Winter of 1884, before he (Dalimpere)

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*succumbs to madness.* As with previous narrators, Dalimpere's letters are self-aware and imprecise fictions. They cannot capture Yellow Tail's "diverse and unconnected" stories, nor can they define Blackfeet subjectivity because individuals have more than one name. More important, Dalimpere's letters can never tell the truth about the Blackfeet people because he "will never understand the Indian mind." Language cannot reflect the real; it can only signify it.

In reading the letters, Doby Saxon learns about the Blackfeet people's history, culture, and their struggles to survive. He changes, reconnecting to Blackfeet history. Within Doby, a glimmer of hope develops. When he "settled his voice down...you can see the Yellowtail in him the most...from that criminal hope in his voice, but that's not the end either." These letters show that today the reservation is as socially and culturally desolate, beautiful, complicated, humorous, and full of life as it was one hundred years ago. Jones masterfully demonstrates the similarities and the differences between the Blackfeet Nation of the 1880s and today. Ultimately, the letters show that the Marias/Baker Massacre, the Winter of 1884, the conquest of the Blackfeet Nation, the smallpox epidemic, and the mismanagement of the American Indian affairs by the US government are still having effects a hundred years later.

In *Ledfeather*, Stephen Graham Jones uses the postmodern play of Gerald Vizenor and other postmodern American writers to revisit Welch's Blackfeet Reservation. But, like Vizenor (and Welch), in this revisit, he creatively re-imagines a contemporary American Indian subjectivity that is not trapped in the white/red hierarchy, which defines the American Indian either as a victim or as a beneficiary of American conquest. With *Ledfeather*, along with *The Bird is Gone* and *The Fast Red Road*, Jones picks up where Gerald Vizenor (and James Welch) leaves off in taking American Indian fiction in an entirely new direction.

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