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**Review of *Four American Indian Literary Masters: N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Gerald Vizenor*  
By Alan R. Velie**

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*Four American Indian Literary Masters: N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Gerald Vizenor.* By Alan R. Velie. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982. Photographs, notes, selected bibliography, index. xi + 164 pp. \$14.95, paper \$9.95.

Some of today's best writing is by Native American authors. That fact is not as widely known as it should be for two reasons: the majority culture tends to compartmentalize writing by and about Native Americans as "Indian" literature, and the traditions out of which such writing comes are different in many respects from European traditions, causing it to be undervalued and/or misunderstood. There is a strong need for bridge building between literary cultures in this country, and an equally strong need to break down the tendency to restrict Native American literature to ethnic categories.

Alan R. Velie's *Four American Indian Literary Masters: N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Gerald Vizenor* addresses those needs. A crisply written introduction to the works of leading Native American writers, the book not only explains those writers in terms of their own cultural traditions but also places them in the larger context of the literary traditions of the world.

Velie's introduction concisely and effectively emphasizes the complexity of Native American cultures and literatures and is an appropriate cornerstone for the essays that follow.

Of those essays, the strongest are on the poetry of Momaday and Welch. He connects their poems to an interesting variety of European and American traditions, and identifies their Native American aspects in the process. Another strong essay is "The Search For Identity,"

which is at once a fairly detailed explanation of Momaday's development as an artist and a dramatization of the complexity of multicultural origins.

Velie's essays on the novels of Momaday and Welch are also useful but they are at times uneven. They contain occasional declarations that probably should have been presented as suggestions, or at least more fully explained, and several misleading statements about narrative events. For example, Velie calls *House Made of Dawn* Momaday's "masterpiece," without addressing the credible belief of some readers that *The Way To Rainy Mountain* may be the better book. In evaluating Welch's novel *Winter in the Blood*, Velie is probably too absolute in his belief that the negativism of the book's "winter" continues as the book ends. To the contrary, it is possible to read the narrator's concluding thoughts and actions with guarded optimism.

Velie's essays on Silko and Vizenor are also helpful, although he barely mentions Silko's poetry, despite her poems that rival those of Momaday and Welch. As with Momaday and Welch, an understanding of Silko's poetry is fundamental to an understanding of her prose. All three writers have been strongly influenced by the poetic oral traditions of their tribes.

Also, Velie might have included a conclusion, drawing together some of the themes and motifs discussed throughout the book, especially since some of the essays seem to end inconclusively. Such connections, however, are occasionally implied or stated in the essays, and the careful reader will probably draw his or her own conclusions.

Overall, the essays in *Four American Literary Masters* should be useful to a variety of beginning students and teachers of Native American literatures. The book is a substantive examination of an increasingly important body of American literature and should be widely distributed.

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