

# Cross cultural workshop highlights writing in two worlds

By BILL HESS

Tundra Times Staff

Writing offers a unique challenge to the artist who must communicate the experience of living in two distinct cultures to the rest of the world. Native Alaskan writers found themselves in agreement on this

point with four prominent national artists as they gathered in Anchorage last weekend for the Cross-Cultural Writers Workshop.

Getting started in writing was difficult, remembered James Welch, a 41-year-old Blackfeet Indian from Montana with three

books behind him and another coming up.

"I had a hard time finding material to write about," said Welch, who writing has been favorably compared to Hemingway's by some critics. "Then I discovered that if I focused in on my experiences as a Native

American, I had my material."

He used that material to put together such works as "Winter in the Blood," a story of a young Indian in Montana seemingly adrift in the modern world.

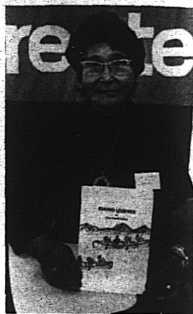
He wrote it in a way which would have been impossible for anyone outside of his world to have done. "If you want to write, find out as much about your own culture as you possible can," Welch said. "Don't let yourself be sidetracked."

Lela Kiana Oman, a social worker from Nome, was following this advice even before Welch was born. "My people are story tellers," she explains, recalling the many pleasant times when she sat and listened as her elders told her stories dealing with the Eskimo way of life.

Then, 33 years ago, the adult Lela was overcome with an urge to write which still burns strong. "I enjoyed these stories so much as a child, that I wanted to share them with others," she explains. "Especially with the children, many of who will not get to hear them the way I did." Lela began to write.

She submitted her work to publishers, both in Alaska and outside. All she got was a disappointing string of rejections. Then Dr. Scanlan from the University of Alaska visited her village. He read her work. "These are good," he told me. Don't give up. Soon there will be people who need these stories. Not now, but soon."

Scanlan was right. Oman's book, "Eskimo Legends," is now in its fourth printing, this time with illustrations by her sister, Minnie Kiana Keezen. Her second book, "The Ghost of Kingikty," is out of print now, but is going to be incorporated into Circum-Polar Volumes, a compilation of works from all the native peoples of the polar regions. The book is put to-



Lela Kiana Oman

gether by the Russian, Yuri Rytkheu.

Oman is getting ready to come out with her third book, "Gayag," (Kayak) which she hopes will be out this fall. She regards this as her master work. "This will be as long as my last two books put together," she boasts. "I have been working on this on and off for the past 33 years, even while I did my other books. I wanted it to be my best work."

Her works come strictly from her Eskimo heritage. She writes the legends she has heard since childhood, and claims to be the first person ever to have put them down on paper. Never has she incorporated the work of an outsider into one of her pieces. Once she has written a piece, Lela does additional research by checking it for accuracy against the versions of other Eskimo story tellers.

"Writing is hard work," she notes, "but it is something that I must do. It gives me great satisfaction. I am telling the children what out people went through. They use my books in the schools. I can tell the children

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# Writers discuss problems they face living in "two worlds"

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these stories, and I don't even have to be there! Publishing is a good thing!"

Nora Dauenhauer is a Tlingit living in Anchorage who has also taken the words of her people and put them into print.

Along with her husband Richard, she has co-authored the book, "Because We Cherish You, Sealaska Elders Speak to the Future." It is a compilation of the words of Tlingit and Haida Elders, addressed to the young, whom they truly cherish.

Nora also has published poetry in different Alaskan and Canadian publications. She holds a B.A. in anthropology and has devoted herself to the study of her own Tlingit language and literature.

It was during the process of transcribing Tlingit oral works into both her Native tongue and English for educational purposes that Nora found that she herself could write. She is particularly fond of poetry, which is what she has published most widely.

"Because We Cherish You" puts into print the stories told in Southeastern society at certain social events and feasts; those known to outsiders as potlatches. It is written in Tlingit along with an English translation. "My husband knows more about the use of English (he is a college professor and a poet laureate) and I know more Tlingit. He sees things I don't see, and I see things he doesn't see."

Nora hopes to fully develop herself as a writer, both of poetry and prose. "My husband's advice is that I've got to keep at it, to write and write. It's like baseball, if you don't do it all the time, you lose the knack." Nora believes Native writers should also read and read, to help them sharpen their own skills.

"Read the works of James Welch. Read Maxine Hong Kingston's 'Woman Warrior.' Hong Kingston is a Chinese-American writer who also participated in the workshop). They too are cross-cultural writers.

There is a lot to learn from them," Nora also likes Beowulf, the Anglo-Saxon folk epic, and the poet, E.E. Cummings.

Earl Atchak, 16, and Regina Nash, 15, may just be two of the people who will do it. Along with Pius Imgalrea, the director of the Chevak Village Youth Association, they flew in from their village in Western Alaska for the workshop. Earl is the editor of a monthly paper put out by the CVYA, and Regina is one of his reporters. The association also hopes to come out with a history book soon. The young people of Chevak have already gathered much information on cassette tapes, and they expect to begin writing soon.

Atchak has found a reporter's work to be very demanding, in many ways. "It's a lot of walking, this newspaper. I walk about five miles every day." Chevak is a village of only 550 people, but it is spread out over a wide area.

Atchak hopes to write much in the future, and looks forward to the day when he comes out with his own books. He does not yet know what topics they will cover, although he feels a good history of his Chevak people would be nice. He does know he wants to put on paper some of the information now residing in the brain of his grandfather, Joseph Friday.

"Grandpa is the oldest guy in Chevak," Earl boasts. "No one knows how old. I learn much from him. He talks to everyone in town. I think his knowledge should be written down. Right now, I only know about 3 percent of it, but I will learn more."

"I think writing on paper is very important," director Pius adds. "Whatever we say is written on paper. Long in the future, our sons and daughters will be able to know what happened in the past. Our elders have long lived on subsistence. They have always told their stories, it hasn't been written. Nowadays, I've got two children. They can't even speak Native. So I think it's important to

write."

Yet writing and publishing do not always come together.

As Welch emphasizes, a Native Alaskan living in a remote village must overcome immense barriers to get his work published.

"I know a lot of people, Native people, who are getting into publishing. Yet there is no

press set up exclusively for Native material. Most people don't know how to go about getting published. I would hope that some funding could be set aside to help Native people break into the publishing world. We'll have to try and do something about that. There should be workshops and there's not.

I'm going to talk to some people, both in education and government about this."

Welch himself broke through writing and publishing, and sending many articles out to small publications. It took a while, but finally he succeeded. "I guess there's really no other way to do it," he muses.