

FORBES WINS COVETED NATIVE LITERATURE AWARD

Perhaps one of the greatest honors, which can be bestowed upon a Native American writer, is to be selected by other writers as the holder of the Lifetime Achievement award of the Native Writer's Circle of the Americas. Since 1992, when the first "Returning the Gift" conference was held in Norman, Oklahoma, each year an outstanding writer has been so honored. N. Scott Momaday was the first winner.

For 2009 the winner of the award is Jack D. Forbes, a historian, poet, novelist, essayist, journalist, and advocate for Indigenous rights. Jack, of Powhatan-Renape, Delaware-Lenape, and other ancestry, wrote his first articles for the Eagle's Scream, his high school newspaper. His first published scholarly article, on Powhatan history, came out in late 1955, when he was twenty-one years old.

By his thirty-fifth year, when he joined the University of California, Davis campus (1969) Jack had written Apache, Navaho and Spaniard, The Indian in America's Past, Warriors of the Colorado, Nevada Indians Speak, Afro-Americans in the Far West, and Native Americans of California and Nevada, along with numerous articles and monographs. In that year he became a full professor and spearheaded the establishment of one of the very first Native American Studies programs in North America. Since the early 1960s he had been seeking to establish a Native university as well as Indian Studies programs and other Native-controlled institutions including a national museum.

Jack Forbes' first poems were written in 1955-6 but he didn't become a published poet until the early

1980s. It seems that years ending with “9” are very important for him. In summer 1979, after finishing Native Americans and Nixon, he turned to fiction, writing the first draft of his novel Red Blood, and also recording several cassettes of songs and song-poems, as well as trying his hand at short-story writing. Poems soon followed after being inspired by the work of Blackfeet poet James Welch and by working with student poets in Native American Studies’ classes at Davis. Soon Forbes was a reciter of poems at many venues as far away as England, Japan, Netherlands, Canada, and frequently on campus where he organized a Third World Literature Group. Forbes even formed branches of the latter at Warwick and Oxford in Britain in 1981-2 and 1986-7 respectively.

The “Returning the Gift” gatherings of Native writers in Norman, Ottawa, Albuquerque, Tacoma, and elsewhere spurred Forbes on to greater endeavors in poetry and fiction. His novel Red Blood was published in Canada by a First Nations press and first distributed at the Before Columbus foundation awards in Chicago in 1994. There he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from that foundation.

Jack’s short fiction is partly available in an anthology, Only Approved Indians, and stories have also been published in Winds of Change, Rikka, Circle of Motion, Wicazo Sa Review, Gatherings, Earth Song, Sky Spirit, Callaloo, Gone to Croatan, and in Russian and German translations. His most famous story, “Only Approved Indians Can Play Made in USA,” has been anthologized several dozen times and is used in texts designed to teach literature and textual analysis.

Between 1980 and today he has had some ninety poems published in English, Delaware, Russian, German,

and Spanish. His chapbooks include Middle Continent People (1986), Naming our Land (1992), El-Lay Riots (1992), What is Time? (1997), What is Space? (2001), and Atta! And other poems on 9-11, War, And Peace (2002). Individual poems, or groups of them, have appeared in publications such as I Tell You Now, Gatherings, Blue Cloud Quarterly, Akwesasne Notes, Okike, Poetry East, Voices of the First Nations, Returning the Gift, Mockingbird, Cimarron Review, The Chariton Review, Haight-Ashbury Literary Journal, Chilam Balam, phati'tude, and Without Reservation.

Forbes has several new anthologies of his unpublished poetry in the works, including an epic poem on "The Great Valley," the story of the Great California Central Valley from the Ice Age to the present day. His most recent books are The American Discovery of Europe (2007) and a revised edition of Columbus and Other Cannibals (2008).