FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Black Silk Handkerchief
D. L. Birchfield
University of Oklahoma Press
978-0-8061-3751-3
(April 18, 2006)

The first of a proposed series of mysteries, this novel introduces protagonist Bill Mallory, a drifter who privately sees himself through the lens of his Choctaw name, Hom-Astubby. Although he has a law degree, Mallory works as a freelance nature photographer. He is on assignment in the small and remote town of Alpine, Colorado, when he becomes involved in the disappearance of a glamorous former Olympic skier and the murder of a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter. When the amiable county sheriff hires him to take crime-scene photos, Mallory finds himself smack in the center of the investigation.

The author, who won the 2005 Spur Award from Western Writers of America for his novel *Field of Honor*, endows Mallory with a distractingly convoluted history. In addition to his varied academic and job experiences (he's worked for a succession of newspapers), Mallory has also—before the story opens—won nearly nine million dollars playing the slots at an Indian casino. Of that amount, he spent five million on an enormous horse ranch in Oklahoma, a spread that boasts a seven-story mansion with 298 bathrooms.

Yet despite his substantial wealth, Mallory frets incessantly about being hassled by the IRS, is constantly low on cash, and wheedles editors into paying him exorbitant fees for his news photos. While fascinating in themselves, none of these details seems to bear on the plot or on Mallory's actions within it.

On the purely personal side, Mallory is torn between the gaudy lures of the white world he's chosen to be in and the more common-sense values of his tribe. He ponders, for example, the differences in marriages between the two societies: "Instead of living a leisurely life in the modest but adequate midst of a cooperative and sharing community," he reflects, "each white couple lived in carefully guarded and very expensive seclusion, in the most wastefully large and pretentious house they could 'finance,' which they used as a base from which to work and worry themselves into nervous exhaustion." Even as he muses on this puzzle, he is driving a mammoth truck and custom-designed camper that cost him a million bucks.

Relying on information from the sheriff, an informal network of newspaper friends, and

clues he discovers in his own photographs, Mallory gradually narrows down the list of suspects. Principal among these are the secretive and menacing Texas billionaire, Nelson Towers, and some lurking white supremacists. Birchfield, a Choctaw himself, has an obvious love for the West and a real gift for depicting the rugged landscape. But with all the wealth William Hom-Astubby Mallory has accumulated by the book's end, one wonders how he will maintain his distinctive "drifter detective" persona for subsequent mysteries.

Edward Morris