The reason why James Welch combines myth and reality in the last part has many dimensions.

First, it’s consistent with the literary context. As we see from former parts, the line between spiritual world and real world is blurred, and the Pikunis believed in and are guided by their dreams or some kind of prophecies, and they believed a kind of pantheism where the difference between animal, human, and god is not clear. Many important events, such as the raid on Crows, were foreshadowed by dreams. Therefore, the fact that Fools Crow was led by the dream helper to meet a supposedly dead woman who gave him visions would not be surprising.

Second, through visions, we could view some of the events as an objective third personal observer. I think the author did not want the readers to experience these events from the perspective of the main characters like Fools Crow, or from the perspective of a person lived 100 years later, who is most likely to be a white American. In the visions, the massacre was not described in detail, and therefore the emotions, such as hatred, fear and disgust, that would have been induced if viewed from the first personal perspective, would be alleviated. And the vision where the animals were gone and the Pikunis were essentially integrated in the white society and changed their way of life. I think the author wanted to remind us of what would happen but did not intent to explicitly write it out. I will discuss this further below.

Third, such prophecy, combined with Fools Crow’s return, produced a kind of stiffness, disparity, and hopelessness. Fools Crow was revealed of what would happen, but it was only some vague process, not the reason or cause. For example, “Then the design faded but its image lingered in Fools Crow’s mind. He wanted to call it back, to learn of the hairy faces’ destination. … Were they after Mountain Chief? Who would they make cry?”. He had questions but could not get the answer. Another example: “…But what did they die of? There were more boxes on the ridge than he could count. Was it the white-scabs? And why didn’t the people bury their dead in the proper way? Once again he searched the yellow skin for an answer. But the yellow land told him nothing.”. Again, he did not get the answer. Though Fools Crow knew what would happen, he did not know how to prevent the events. After he returned to the tribe, as he witnessed, some of those visions became true and he was powerless. Even worse, in fact, he was not able to do anything to prevent them from happening - to fight the Napikwans was dangerous and to move to the other side of Medicine Line was also unpredictable. In the second to the last chapter, at the end of discussion between the survivors and Fools Crow, they again reached no decision or conclusion, just like all the previous councils between the war chiefs.

Fourth, the meeting with Feather Woman and the visions creates a sense of destiny and fate. First of all, Feather Woman provided some kind of explanation to the suffering of Pikunis. It was because of her misdemeanor that the Sun Chief decided that she and her people would suffer. In this way, in the name of a god, the suffering and near extinction of the Pikunis and Blackfoot seemed inevitable. I think the author, together with other contemporary Blackfoot people, struggled in trying to find a cause or reason of their people’s fate. To blame the Napikwans seemed somewhat powerless, since they were the victors and it seemed that their crime could never be punished and the Pikunis’ loss could never be repaid. To blame the Pikunis themselves seemed also improbable since they indeed did not have many options. Therefore, to attribute their suffering to a god seemed to be a somewhat acceptable explanation. In the last vision, the Pikunis children “lose their own way”, and Feather Woman said “Much will be lost to them, but they will know the way it was. The stories will be handed down…” This seemed a resigned and self comforting attitude that the author held towards what happened to his people in the 19th century. Both the character and the author had to find a way to view the changes, some voluntary, some forced.

Last but not least, such technique creates a sense of connection between now and then, and lets the readers associate with the characters, and stand in their position, from their perspective, to view the historical events.

The ending of the novel isn’t really an “end” to the whole story. I assume many readers, like myself, would wonder what happened to the Lone Eaters and Pikunis, whether they survived white-scabs and Napikwans, whether their culture continued, whether the vision of the yellow skin of Feather Woman actually came to reality. The author gave no answers. This kind of technique reminds me of James Joyce’s Dubliners.

Purely based on the tone of the last paragraphs, it is indeed a happy ending – the children were playing and the blackhorns had returned. Also, in the last part of the story, the spread of white scab disease seemed to be suppressed, and, as far as we know, the Lone Eaters had not been harassed by the Napikwans. It seemed that they could enjoy their peaceful life in a while.

However, considering the whole story, we can see that the ending isn’t really that hopeful. In fact, none of the problems that Pikunis faced was solved. They still had to deal with the Napikwans, they still had to decide how they should proceed with their life and culture, they were still struggling between tradition and progress. This kind of stiffness again reminds me of James Joyce, who also describes the life of a people facing the challenge of aliens and time. In the second to the last chapter, at the end of discussion between the survivors and Fools Crow, they again reached no decision or conclusion, just like all other councils between the war chiefs. Even worse, when Fools Crow said “We must think of our children”, he soon realized the people he addressed had no children.

Moreover, we have the final vision of the yellow skin. The other visions were all realized, the spread of white-scabs and the massacre by Napikwans. In this sense, even if not considering the fact that the whole story had already happened in the past, we readers know exactly what would happen to the Pikunis and Blackfoot, and that could not be easily categorized as happy ending. The stories were carried on, the culture somehow survived, although their way of life was definitely changed. I think the author himself could not find an easy way to categorize the story in the book and the ongoing story of the Pikunis and all native Americans.