



Book Club Kit

About the Author

from <https://milkweed.org/author/richard-wagamese>

T 780-459-1682

E sapl@sapl.ca

Richard Wagamese (1955-2017) was one of Canada's foremost writers, and one of the leading indigenous writers in North America. He was the author of several acclaimed memoirs and more than a dozen novels, including *Indian Horse*, *Medicine Walk*, and *Dream Wheels*. *Indian Horse* was the People's Choice winner of the national Canada



Reads competition in 2013, and its film made its world premiere at the 2017 Toronto International Film Festival. Wagamese began his career in 1979 as a journalist and worked as a newspaper columnist and reporter, radio and television broadcaster and producer, and documentary producer—both individual works and his body of work have been celebrated with numerous awards, including the George Ryga Award for Social Awareness in Literature, the Canadian Authors Association Award for Fiction, and the Matt Cohen Award in Celebration of a Writing Life. Wagamese was honored with Honorary Doctor of Letters degrees from Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops and Lakehead University Bay. He lived in Kamloops, British Columbia.

About *One Native Life*

from mcnallyrobinson.com

In 2005, award-winning writer Richard Wagamese moved with his partner to a cabin outside Kamloops, B.C. In the crisp mountain air Wagamese felt a peace he'd seldom known before.

Abused and abandoned as a kid, he'd grown up feeling there was nowhere he belonged. For years, only alcohol and moves from town to town seemed to ease the pain.

In *One Native Life*, Wagamese looks back down the road he has travelled in reclaiming his identity and talks about the things he has learned as a human being, a man and an Ojibway in his fifty-two years. Whether he's writing about playing baseball, running away with the circus, attending a sacred bundle ceremony or meeting Pierre Trudeau, he tells these stories in a healing spirit. Through them, Wagamese celebrates the learning journey his life has been.

Free of rhetoric and anger despite the horrors he has faced, Wagamese's prose resonates with a peace that has come from acceptance. Acceptance is an Aboriginal principle, and he has come to see that we are all neighbours here. *One Native Life* is his tribute to the people, the places and the events that have allowed him to stand in the sunshine and celebrate being alive.

Reviews

from amazon.ca

"[Richard Wagamese's] latest book of nonfiction showcases him as a writer of insight and eloquence, as it recounts episodes of his life from childhood onward. Whether about growing up in foster care or about reuniting with his Ojibway heritage, the dozens of original essays that comprise *One Native Life* extol the virtues of reclaiming displaced identity and healing through a sense of belonging." (Georgia Straight)

"The power of...*One Native Life* lies in its ability to explain how the residential school system affected not only the generations of natives who attended, but those who followed, and what needs to be done to rebuild families. Yet what has the potential to be a depressing and difficult read is instead an incredibly inspiring book, on that should be read by all Canadians." (Calgary Herald)

"Wagamese wrote movingly -- and with applauded bravery for his openness -- about his abuse and booze-damaged past in the 2002 memoir *For Joshua*, addressed to his son. In what reads as almost a continuation of that earlier book, *One Native Life* describes the author's continued emotional healing, a recovery with his Anishnabeg roots at the core." (Toronto Star)

"Delicate and strangely beautiful, each vignette (written in early dawn) seems to radiate from point to luminous point...This is the language of trauma and its miraculous recovery, a beautiful and important Canadian work." (Globe & Mail)

"Each story -- almost without exception -- is positive and uplifting, meaningful and supportive of his new, well-anchored life. All of his memories are formed from the vantage point of where he is now, a tribute to the qualities of memoir...Grounded as he now appears to be, and secure in his identity, Richard Wagamese in his 50s may be just hitting his stride." (Saskatoon Star-Phoenix)

"In quiet tones and luminous language, Wagamese shares his hurts and insights and joys, inviting readers to find the ways in which they are joined to him and to consider how they might be joined to others." (Winnipeg Free Press)

"[Wagamese's] memoir is an insightful look at his search for his roots and the traditions binding him not only to his people but the 'great, grand circle' of humanity." (Book List)

"*One Native Life* is a journey, snapshots of events as Wagamese moves through a life of loneliness, forever searching for that place to belong as he travels to reclaim an identity denied him as a child. Within these vignettes, we see the joyous spirit Wagamese has become." (Chronicle Herald)

"Writing with appealing warmth and gentle humour, he is frank about his insecurities and failings. Rather than play the blame game, [Wagamese] concentrates on appreciating the people who nurtured and helped him when he needed it most." (Vancouver Sun)

"This design is perfect in its simplicity: it captures the personal content and informal tone of Wagamese's writing in a quiet, inviting, and unassuming way. There's a sense of both narrative and history in the birch-bark background." (Quill & Quire)

Novelist Richard Wagamese steps beyond barriers

MPR News Staff | June 28, 2016 | mprnews.org

Richard Wagamese on 'Dream Wheels' and 'Medicine Walk'

Editor's note (March 15, 2017): Author Richard Wagamese died March 10, 2017. This interview with Wagamese originally aired June 28, 2016.

Richard Wagamese is a well-known novelist in Canada, and with the re-release of two of his novels through Minneapolis publisher Milkweed Editions, he's making his mark further south.

Wagamese joined MPR News host Tom Weber as part of Indigenous Book Club Month.

The first of the two novels, "Dream Wheels," follows a Native American bull rider who is crippled by an "unrideable" bull. He retreats from life, sinking into a depression on his family

ranch. Miles away, a teenage boy raised in the city runs afoul of the law, and is sent to work on the ranch. His mother joins him there, escaping an abusive relationship.

"They find a ways and a means to work together, and help themselves to heal," Wagamese said. Louise Erdrich the novel hailed it as "a ripping read."

The story reflects some of Wagamese's own difficult past. He was removed from his birth family as a toddler, and did not reconnect with his Native ancestry until he was 24. In the years in between, he was shuttled from foster home to foster home before landing in an abusive adoptive home.

"So I understand the nature of being raised in brokenness more than togetherness, and that certainly colored the way that I wrote the novel," Wagamese said. At the same time, the novel transcends many of the difficulties of his own life.

"I think that novel was my first effort to step beyond the barriers that we sometimes erect around ourselves in terms of our storytelling, as Native American and indigenous authors," he said. "We sometimes tend to write stories that involve us being survivors — surviving or transcending some degree of horror and difficulty — and I wanted create a family who don't have any of that. In this novel, nobody's a drunk, nobody's homeless, nobody's going to prison or coming out. Nobody's doing all of these things that sometimes color our narratives. Instead, they have an almost Walton's-kind-of-feel, whereby their lives are predictable and safe and routine."

"There's a great deal of love and affection, and I wanted to paint them as though they were the neighbors that everyday Americans and everyday Canadians walk and talk beside, to show we're all just people at the very centers of ourselves."

The second of Wagamese's novels being released by Milkweed Editions, "Medicine Walk," addresses darker family drama head on: It centers on a 16-year-old boy growing up in rural British Columbia. He's estranged from his father, who only appears in his life in fleeting moments of drunkenness.

Finally, his father summons him as he's on his death bed, dying of liver failure. He asks his son an incredible favor.

"He asks him to take him 40 miles into the backcountry to a ridge he knows from his days as a lumberjack, and bury him in the traditional Ojibwe manner — being seated facing the east. It's because that's the way a warrior is buried."

"His son wrestles with the notion of how his father could consider himself a warrior, when all he knows him as is a drunk," Wagamese said. The New York Times [wrote](#) that the novel, "feels less written than painstakingly etched into something more permanent than paper."

Audio available at <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2016/06/28/books-richard-wagamese>

Additional Interviews:

AUDIO: CBC Books Interview on The Candy Palmater Show (Jun 1, 2016):

<https://www.cbc.ca/books/one-native-life-1.3985693>

VIDEO: "An immaculate measure of Grace" Richard's powerful speech from the Matt Cohen Awards: <https://milkweed.org/blog/rest-in-power-richard-wagamese>

VIDEO: Author Richard Wagamese Reads from One Native Life:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/richardwagamese>

Out of trauma, an impossible blue

Karen Luscombe | The Globe and Mail | Published September 6, 2008

Award-winning Ojibwa writer Richard Wagamese, a self-described survivor of "post-traumatic stress disorder" (PTSD), courageously navigates the psychological contours of this hostile terrain via the publication of two distinct works. In a novel, *Ragged Company*, he acknowledges the unheralded support workers from all the "drop-in centres, missions, shelters, and hostels,"

who, as he puts it, "showed me the way up when all he could see was down." In a memoir, *One Native Life*, he explains that the "stories" therein are therapeutically "positive" and "embrace healing." What is remarkable here is the sense of sheer spiritual luminosity Wagamese achieves in the very midst of gruesome tragedy - the capture, that is, of the eternal sky, or what he so beautifully calls an "impossible blue."

Ragged Company begins with an engaging premise: To escape an Arctic cold snap, four homeless "rounders" - Amelia One Sky, a wizened old Ojibwa; a bereft ex-carver called Timber; an illiterate "innocent" nicknamed "Double Dick"; and a ferocious scavenger called "Digger" - all take refuge within a movie matinee. Entranced by the film (Wim Wenders's 1987 *Wings of Desire*), the four become movie junkies, and soon forge an unlikely intimacy with another habitual escapee - Granite Harvey, a disconsolate ex-journalist looking to lose himself in someone else's story.

Their lives take an abrupt turn, however, when Digger happens upon an unusually heavy pack of discarded cigarettes: inside, some cigarettes, three \$20-dollar bills and an innocuous yellow stub. As luck would have it, the stub is a lottery ticket and Digger has won the jackpot: \$13.5-million. But when the rounders try to claim their prize (Digger decides to share), they are deemed ineligible for lack of proper identification. "Square John" Granite - complete with driver's license, lawyer and bank manager - comes to their aid. But, the freedom that money brings also affords reflection, and the five (including Granite) confront some implacable demons.

Wagamese writes with brutal clarity. Amelia's narrative begins: "It was Irwin that started all the dying" and, by page 11, the body count is no less than nine - and the deaths are colourful: one by drowning, two by fire, a sub-zero exposure, a stabbing, two deaths by bludgeoning, a suicide and a rather expected seedy overdose. By page 273, we arrive at the unspeakable: "Two tiny feet stuck out of a five-gallon lard pail. ... Three months old. Drowned. Drowned in my vomit. Drowned in my puke." This is odious content proffered with stark and gutting gravitas. You will blanch.

The cause of such despair, for Wagamese, is systemic. And his indictment of, particularly, the missionary school system scathes. After the deaths of her brothers, young Amelia emotionally withdraws; the nuns label her "slow." As she explains, "I gave them nothing back because all I knew was the vast amount they had taken from me, robbed me of, cheated me out of, all in the name of a God whose son bore the long hair none of us were allowed to wear any more." Later, Amelia describes her brother Frank's coldness with deft jab at Christian "mercy": Frank was "searching for a peg to hang his life on. It was a cold, hard peg he chose - vindictive as a nail through the palms."

Wagamese finds alleviating balance through magical legend (Manitou Nodin, Nanabush the trickster, Weendigo the cannibal) and poetic swells of sensate imagery. Cinematic light, for Timber, dims into an embrace: "When those lights start to fade, slow and almost unnoticeable like falling into a dream, I let go, I allow myself to fall, sliding, sliding away from the monster cold beyond this place and into the soft, warm arms of the darkness."

There is also a rather eerie gentle reverence through the ruminant conversation of two hovering voices that intermittently comment on the lower rung of rounder-narrative. One voice, the spirit of a formerly abused (and grotesquely traumatized) victim, offers extraordinary acceptance: "Time isn't what we think. Not really. It's fragments, shards, pieces, and when we think back it's the pieces we pick up, not the whole." These "shards" are the perceptual remnants of trauma - partial, contingent and, finally, all we have. But it is enough, Wagamese suggests, considering the nature of the wound.

Wagamese's memoir, *One Native Life*, works from a very different palette. Delicate and strangely beautiful, each vignette (written in early dawn) seems to radiate from point to luminous point; the release of a jackfish provides redemptive silence, a stolen kiss unveils a sky, "suddenly blue," the discovery of the constellation Arcturus reveals a path to wonder, and a glimpse from the doe, Way-wash-ka-zhee, offers "a crucial joining, a shared breath of creation." The Ojibway language, too, sounds like the hush of winds.

There are also infectiously giddy cameos: As a runaway, Wagamese shared lemon pie with Muhammad Ali; as a "red-mined" journalist, he interrogated Pierre Trudeau; researching an art piece, he chatted with reclusive painter Norval Morrisseau; and with Johnny Cash, he bemoaned the loss of the communal living room.

But again we have a traumatic core. In a shocking revelation, we learn that his aunt broke Wagamese's left arm and shoulder by jumping on him (he was not yet one year old): For years, the palm of his hand, "was turned outward, and it atrophied and shrunk." When he was a toddler, she tied him to the ground and whipped him. And an uncle, afflicted by rage and alcohol, tried to drown him and his brother soon after.

Everything came to a peak in February, 1958, when the adults, who'd left for town to sell furs, got sidetracked during a drunken binge and abandoned Wagamese (still a toddler) and his siblings to the bush. The culprits again are systemic: "spiritual beggary" at the missionary schools, an alienating "vortex of foster homes," the violence of his adopted Presbyterian family, reams of racist slurs and a scar under his left eyebrow from "a police baton wielded during a protest in 1976."

But Wagamese has a tandem aim to personal healing, the promotion of Canadian "social greatness." Here, his tone is frank, pragmatic and persuasive. Having recounted his sense of pride as a young man, after safely driving a group of neighbouring white farmers back and forth during the harvest, he extends the image of careful driving to a metaphor for treaty negotiation: "There's no right or wrong in this. There's only honour and dishonour. That's the straight fact of it. There's only the harvesting of a common future, neighbours rallying to get the job done, bringing it home, the drive smooth and measured so as not to topple anyone."

Unlike the narrative closure of traditional novelistic form (well-rounded character arcs, happy endings) or the relatively stiff genre of autobiography (checkable dates, verifiable facts), memoir (French for "memory") implies a breathier text, a looser form of self-reflection, a more experiential and so impressionistic sketch of one's past. These impressions are not any less "true" - on the contrary, their impact is all the more felt due to their capacity to speak to

emotion, mystery and faith. There is an evocation of privacy in memoir that evokes intimacy rather than proofs. This is Wagamese's gift: We like this man. And so, we listen.

But it is Wagamese's mesmerizing sense of spiritual communion that so deeply resonates: "We live with pieces of the sky inside us," he offers. "In our cells is the very stuff of space. The arc of our travel is wonderful to see, the trail of it incandescent, joined to an impossible blue." This is the language of trauma and its miraculous recovery, a beautiful and important Canadian work.

Discussion Questions - *One Native Life* by Richard Wagamese

1. Why do you think that Richard finds the natural world so compelling throughout his life?
2. During his childhood, important adults in Richard's life recognize the experiences and support that he needs for his spiritual and intellectual growth and provide them. Were there any adults in the book who stood out for you?
3. Explore the dichotomy between the physical labour that the author did to support himself (the means to end) versus his self-driven learning and intellectual aspirations (music, art history, reading, and writing).
4. For Richard, popular figures like John Lennon, Muhammad Ali, Johnny Cash and others, are elevated to the status of a tribal person, warrior poet, and more. What attributes do these heroes possess that distinguish them in this way? Who today could be considered a tribal person because of their words or actions?
5. In reading *One Native Life*, what did you learn about Indigenous peoples in Canada that you didn't know before?
6. As well as being part of the larger memoir, each chapter is its own story. Which one of the stories most resonated with you and why?

7. Why do you think the author chose to structure the book in the way he did into 4 books or parts, each containing many short vignettes?
8. If you could ask Richard a question after reading his memoir, what would you want to know?

Why wasn't an Indigenous director hired to make Indian Horse?

The just-released movie, adapted from the late Richard Wagamese's acclaimed novel about a hockey player who survived Canada's residential school system, highlights problems about who gets to tell stories in this country

By Radheyan Simonpillai / Apr 15, 2018 | nowtoronto.com



PART 1: SEEING INDIAN HORSE

In a story published in Maclean's last month, a headline declared: "For Indigenous people, 'Indian Horse' is much more than a movie."

The film, landing in theatres this weekend after premiering at TIFF

last fall, grapples with the horrors of Canada's residential school history and the trauma inflicted on First Nations.

In the Maclean's story, director Stephen S. Campanelli explains his reaction to reading the late Richard Wagamese's novel and Dennis Foon's adapted screenplay.

"I was shocked and angered and embarrassed to be a Canadian and not know about this. And I wrote an impassioned six-page email saying why I needed to direct it."

The uncomfortable question that I'm certainly not the first to ask is why Campanelli's need to direct a story he previously knew nothing about is prioritized over the ambition of numerous Indigenous filmmakers who have been waiting for the opportunity to tell their stories.

The film follows Saul Indian Horse, a witness to and victim of multiple abuses in the residential school system, where his heritage is systematically stripped away. As played by Sladen Peltier, Forrest Goodluck and Ajuawak Kapashesit at different stages in his life, Saul becomes an against-all-odds hockey star, struggling with whether his gift for Canada's national sport is a resilient stance in the face of colonization or a sign of assimilating to a dominant culture that will never see him as an equal.

The history is rarely, if ever, told in Canadian film, and I sincerely hope audiences get out and reckon with these past injustices. And Indian Horse stars Indigenous talent in front of the camera, including elders like Edna Manitowabi who have survived the residential school system and expressed pride during interviews and Q&As for having the chance to channel their pain into the film.

But while the film stirs up our discomfort by charting injustice, it ultimately feels detached, patched together and soulless – like so many television specials before it.

Indigenous audiences at screenings across the country have expressed how much the film has touched them. There are others who, like me, were left a bit horrified. We are talking about a film reckoning with colonialism that has been adapted entirely by white key creatives (the main producers, director and writer), a set-up we could argue is narrative colonialism.



Indigenous Filmmaker Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers: “It was very apparent that there were no Indigenous key creatives [on Indian Horse]. There’s an outsider/insider perspective. As outsiders, they are inevitably going to tell the story wrong because they don’t get it. They haven’t lived it... And [that’s] reflected so clearly onscreen.”

“It felt like extractive filmmaking at its finest,” says filmmaker Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers, a member of the Kainai First Nation and Sámi from Norway. Tailfeathers spoke to me over the phone from B.C., nearly breathless after wrapping a hectic shoot day for *The Body Remembers When The World Broke Open*, a feature she’s co-directing with Kathleen Hepburn (*Never Steady, Never Still*).

She caught *Indian Horse* when it premiered at the Vancouver International Film Festival last fall and was dismayed by how the adaptation served a book that had resonated with her intimately. Her grandparents had attended a residential school in Canada and she’s seen the impact that system has had on her family and community.

“I felt like I was watching a spectacle of Indigenous trauma,” says Tailfeathers. “It was very apparent that there were no Indigenous key creatives. There’s an outsider/insider perspective. As outsiders, they are inevitably going to tell the story wrong because they don’t get it. They haven’t lived it. They don’t understand it from the perspective of lived experience. And it’s reflected so clearly onscreen.

“It’s yet another film about Indigenous people by non-Indigenous people for non-Indigenous people. It was made for settler audiences to have this emotional catharsis and walk away and feel like they did something.”

There is one caveat that gives Tailfeathers pause, and one that also explains why some Indigenous filmmakers have refrained from voicing their discomfort with the production.

“It’s important that Richard Wagamese gave them the go-ahead,” says Tailfeathers, referring to the late author’s blessings, which are regularly invoked should anyone question the production. “They at least have that going for them.”

PART 2: MAKING INDIAN HORSE

Indian Horse producers Trish Dolman, Christine Haebler and Paula Devonshire graciously agreed to address my concerns on a conference call.

“We’ll take the heat,” Dolman says with utmost seriousness, after recounting the production’s genesis dating back to 2012.

“Trish and I had been looking for something along the lines of a residential school story,” Haebler recalls, explaining that her own understanding of segregation via her European ancestry and Dolman’s childhood growing up near a B.C. residential school are what inspired them to explore the subject matter.

After hearing Wagamese discussing his new novel on a radio show, Haebler and Dolman immediately read Indian Horse and pitched the author on making the film collaboratively.

“We just felt this was an important story that Indigenous and non-Indigenous people needed to tell together because it’s about our shared history,” says Dolman.

“Richard liked the idea of making the film with two white women from British Columbia,” Haebler adds, explaining that the collaboration worked with his ideas about reconciliation.

They won the bid, but according to Dolman, it wasn’t because they offered the most money. A fellow filmmaker (who is Indigenous) made a higher bid on the rights to the novel. But Dolman and Haebler’s extensive track record includes the Simon Pegg and Rosamund Pike comedy *Hector And The Search For Happiness*.

“Richard chose us,” says Dolman. “He chose us because he wanted a film that was as commercial as possible – that would reach as many people as possible.”

To adapt the novel, Dolman and Haebler say they presented Wagamese with a few writers (some Indigenous choices among them). They mutually agreed on Foon, a seasoned scribe whose work they describe as clean and faithful, maintaining Wagamese's voice above all.

Similar reasoning applies to their picking Campanelli as director. His resumé spans three decades as a camera operator, notably for Clint Eastwood's films. Haebler mentions that unofficially he did a lot more floor directing on Eastwood's sets, which is why they felt he could handle their project's scope.

When hired for *Indian Horse* in 2015, Campanelli had just completed his first feature, a barely released action thriller called *Momentum*, which the L.A. Times called "spectacularly generic."

"Richard loved being the voice of the film," says Haebler. "So what we were looking for in a filmmaker was a journeyman director to be able to tell the story very cleanly. We were looking at filmmakers who would not put too much of their own stamp on it. They could just render the story and be authentic to it in the way that Richard really wanted it to be.

"Richard really liked him," Haebler adds. "He really believed in him."

Before settling on Campanelli, they offered the film to New Zealand filmmakers Niki Caro (who is not Indigenous but everyone seems to assume she is) and Taika Waititi (yes, he is). However, neither jives with the "journeyman" adjective. Waititi would go on to put his own stamp on a Marvel movie.

They also approached at least 10 Canadian directors. However....

"No, we didn't go to any Indigenous filmmakers," Haebler admits.

Haebler and Dolman's reasons are unsurprising. The project had a wide scope and an \$8 million budget.

"We needed a director who the financiers would get behind," says Dolman.

“There was a lot of resistance to this story – in financing it, getting it made, sending it to sales companies and finding distribution in Canada. It was rough. We had a lot of rejection. People were saying racist things like ‘Nobody wants to see a movie about Indians.’”

I don’t doubt it. These are the stories we’ve been hearing for years, if not decades. The lack of opportunity for Indigenous filmmakers is not an Indian Horse problem. It’s an industry problem. And there are many who would congratulate Dolman and Haebler for weathering through it and getting the film made at all.

“I have always found it extremely difficult to get any financing for Indigenous films, up until now,” says Paula Devonshire, the third producer brought on to Indian Horse in 2016 when Dolman and Haebler actively sought out an Indigenous partner. Devonshire is a member of the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte First Nation.

“We did have two directors in training who worked alongside Steve in each of the regions we were in,” says Devonshire, pointing to Darlene Naponce and Cara Mumford, Indigenous filmmakers who shadowed the director during production.

That was one of the many efforts the producers made to foster Indigenous talent. Haebler is going on to executive produce Naponce’s next film. Both Haebler and Dolman will be collaborating in the near future with Trevor Mack, a Tsilhqot’in filmmaker. And Devonshire is currently developing a project with Fire Song filmmaker Adam Garnet Jones.

PART 3: THE INDUSTRY PROBLEM

“There’s this trend where both the Canadian state and settlers within Canada feel comfortable approaching historical trauma, like approaching residential schools and the Sixties Scoop,” says Tailfeathers.

“But they are completely unwilling to acknowledge the grave systemic injustice that is ongoing, that is part of the colonial project.”

She turns her attention back to this moment in film culture and Indian Horse’s place in it.

“It’s being paraded as an Indigenous film. But it’s not. It’s taking up space. And that’s what settlers do. It’s about them taking up space. It’s about them choosing which stories have value. It’s about them choosing whose voices should be heard. There are so many incredible Indigenous filmmakers out there. There are so many smart and talented people who have been working so hard and whose work is incredible. Those are the films we should be talking about.”

Jeff Barnaby (*Rhymes For Young Ghouls*), Michelle Latimer (*Rise*), Lisa Jackson (*Savage*), Shane Belcourt (*Tkaronto*) and *Tailfeathers* are among the younger generation picking up the torch from stalwarts like Zacharius Kunuk and Alanis Obomsawin.



Jesse Wenté, of the newly formed Indigenous Screen Office (and a former TIFF programmer and CBC columnist): “When it comes to movies – in Canada but also globally – made about First Nations people, roughly 99.9 per cent of them have been made by non-Indigenous peoples.”

“We’re not lacking in talent,” says Jesse Wenté, the former TIFF programmer and CBC columnist currently figuring out the contours of his role at the newly formed Indigenous Screen Office. Wenté is Ojibwe from the Serpent River First Nation in Ontario.

“We’re lacking in opportunity. People often talk about a capacity issue. There’s tons of capacity. Give us something that we need the capacity for. Test us. Don’t tell us we can’t do these things. Give us \$5 million.”

The persistent challenge for Indigenous filmmakers is that no matter how much talent they show in their short films and micro features, it barely translates to bigger opportunities. According to an October 2013 report by ImagineNATIVE, Indigenous filmmakers are over-

represented in terms of awards and festival exposure but hit a wall when it comes to chances at making features.

Instead they often find themselves working on projects for settler storytellers, populating consulting roles on features or acting as the sole First Nations representative in the writers' room on a television series. It's tokenism easing the way for narrative colonialism.

"Tokenism comes from this inherent understanding that [the settler storytellers] are not really coming from a place of truth," says Tailfeathers. "They haven't properly collaborated. They haven't properly worked with the community whose story they're extracting. We're an afterthought. And that's very apparent in their process."

That process also often trumpets good intentions and well-meaning decisions.

"There's been a long history of good intentions," says Wente. "Remember, the residential schools were well intentioned in theory. There are many instances where you have non-Indigenous storytellers who are very well intentioned.

"But the reality is that when it comes to movies – and this is true in Canada but also globally – made about First Nations people, roughly 99.9 per cent of them have been made by non-Indigenous peoples. My estimates are rough, but not far off. That sort of overwhelming history suggests that maybe those good intentions are getting in the way of better results."

Wente says Canada's history of denying Indigenous communities their narratives goes back to the Indian Act and then the 1884 Potlatch ban, which lasted until 1951. The ban outlawed religious ceremonies, like traditional dances (the Sun Dance) that served as storytelling. That meant Indigenous communities could not keep their cultural artefacts, which went on to populate museums in Canada and across the globe, all the while getting contextualized by non-Indigenous people helming the narrative.

"You have the storytelling that exists outside of these communities while the communities themselves are denied storytelling," says Wente, who says these processes contributed

("generously") to huge cultural misunderstandings or ("least generously") genocide and erasure.

That is the nature of colonial states, Wente reminds us, where culture-making is as extractive as pipelines. Just as natural resources get seized to make the over-culture wealthy, storytelling is appropriated to elevate settler filmmakers with exposure, awards, careers.

"Even if you come with the best of intentions," says Wente, "at what point will it be okay with the over-culture that Indigenous people get to tell their own stories? We are long overdue."

The Indian Horse producers acknowledge that times are changing, and suggest that I would be writing a different story had the film been made today. And signs of progress abound.

Immediately after wrapping on *The Body Remembers When The World Broke Open*, Tailfeathers hopped over to Kahnawake to perform in Jeff Barnaby's new zombie movie, *Blood Quantum*.

And just last week, CBC reported on the upcoming adaptation of Eden Robinson's acclaimed novel *Son Of A Trickster*. In a rare and effective move, Algonquin-Metis filmmaker Michelle Latimer won the rights by going 50-50 with Jennifer Kawaja, co-owner of Sienna Films. That partnership meant they could compete with the bigger production houses that regularly scoop up Indigenous stories.

Latimer is developing a series based on the book and its upcoming sequel, and she filled the writers' room with Indigenous talent: Marie Clements, Adam Garnet Jones, Danis Goulet and Wente.

Meanwhile, Wente is figuring out how to affect change at the Indigenous Screen Office, which was founded by Telefilm, the Canadian Media Fund, the National Film Board, the CBC and APTN.

"The fact that the Screen Office exists, the fact all of these groups agreed to found it, suggests that people in the industry are aware that this needs to be addressed," says Wente.

The office is designed to support Indigenous screen artists across formats, from theatrical to video games. At the moment, Wente is trying to figure out how to work with the different financing streams available in Canada and forge partnerships to help Indigenous storytellers achieve narrative sovereignty. He reminds us that Canada already has a template to work with.

“I can show you examples where we decided that representation really does matter on all aspects of a production, all over the place, for decades now,” says Wente, aiming squarely at Quebec.

Canada nurtures two very separate cinematic cultures between English and French, with an added funding agency called SODEC (Société de développement des entreprises culturelles) to boost support for filmmaking in Quebec. In all this time, it would have been unimaginable to have a Francophone film directed by an Anglophone. French-Canadian cinema has been protected with the kind of narrative sovereignty that Wente hopes will be afforded to Indigenous artists.

“I suspect it will,” says Wente.

Which would perhaps make this the last time we have to gripe about such issues.

Or the second last time. There’s still that Don McKellar-Joseph Boyden movie in the can.



Radheyen Simonpillai

Radheyen's first assignment for NOW was reviewing the Ice Cube heist comedy First Sunday. That was back in January 2008. Born in Sri Lanka and raised in Scarborough, Rad currently lives in Leslieville with his wife and two adorable kids.

Obituaries for Richard Wagamese

BC Book Look

<https://bcbooklook.com/2017/03/28/richard-wagamese-1955-2017/>

Globe & Mail

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/ojibway-author-richard-wagamese-found-salvation-in-stories/article34422836/>