

Hidden Buffalo

Rudy Wiebe

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Red Deer Press (May 30, 2003)

Unknown \$16.95 (32pp)

978-0-88995-285-0

In a time not so long ago when people respected the land and wildlife and relied on nature's bounty for sustenance, lack of buffalo to hunt meant starvation and even death for indigenous people who lived on the plains. As winter approached, storing a supply of buffalo meat to last through the cold months was critical.

Sky Running's people, part of the Cree Nation, have been unable to locate a herd of buffalo. Food is already in short supply, and the tribe is hungry. Sky Running sits on a hill all day, searching the horizon for movement to indicate a herd.

At day's end, he raises his arms to honor the sun and returns home. The little remaining food is shared. His grandmother tells a story about how the buffalo came to feed the Cree. When the Creator made the world, "He showed People food for every season." In addition to the turnip roots and prairie-rose hips, the Creator fashioned great herds of buffalo under a lake and said to the animals: "If you are kind and give them your meat to eat, I promise that you will always have many strong calves." The buffalo came out of the lake, Grandmother relates, and formed a special relationship with the Cree.

She tells the children that it will take "powerful eyes" to find the hidden buffalo. Sky Running finds a white stone in the shape of a buffalo and, as he sleeps holding it, he dreams of the herd's location.

The simple, straightforward tale comes to an emotional climax as the tribe, trusting the boy's vision, breaks camp and moves to where Sky Running said the herd would be. Indeed, the valley is "black with numberless buffalo." Sky Running is rewarded with a white horse and an invitation to participate in the hunt.

Handsome oil paintings, rich with texture and hues of water, fire, earth, and sky, provide the backdrop that only someone familiar with the setting could capture. Such is the renowned Canadian artist, who grew up on the White Bear First Nation in Southeastern Saskatchewan. His work is displayed in the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C., Department of Indian Affairs.

The author, also Canadian, has won two Governor General's Awards for his books, and is the author of nine novels and other collections. This book received funding from the Alberta Foundation for the Arts and the Canada Council for the Arts.

The collaboration of author and illustrator offers a beautiful glimpse into a tale of the Cree Nation, and the lessons of honor, trust, and respect to be learned from it.

LINDA SALISBURY (March / April 2004)

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