

The Animal People Choose a Leader

Short Story

Written by Richard Wagamese

Illustrated by Kristy Cameron

Richard Wagamese is Ojibway from the Wabaseemoong First Nation in northwestern Ontario. Self-educated and self-taught, he is the author of nine titles in memoir and novel form, in addition to a new book of poetry. Richard has won journalism and publishing awards and is an acclaimed public speaker. He lives outside Kamloops, British Columbia, with his wife and dog.

Tips

anthropomorphism: giving human characteristics to something that is not human, such as an animal or inanimate object. The author's use of anthropomorphism in this story is characteristic of traditional First Nations, Inuit, and Métis storytelling.

third-person narrator: a person who is not a character in the story and who tells the story from that perspective

Before

Reflect on the title of the story. Make predictions about the content and potential characters.

During

While reading the story, create a timeline of the race. Think about how this strategy assists you in understanding the selection.

In the Long Ago Time when there was just the Animal People, they decided that they needed to choose a leader. They held a meeting in a great meadow and there was much sage discussion about how this would happen. All members of the animal kingdom were there: birds, reptiles, insects, and all of the four-leggeds. This was in the time when the Animal People could speak to each other with one mind in one common language so even the fish and those that swim could be heard. It was a very solemn occasion.

"A leader must be strong and proud," said Buffalo and the entire circle murmured at his wisdom.

"A leader must carry the medicine power of wisdom," said Wolverine and there was much discussion about his offering.

"Leaders must have a powerful presence. One that commands respect," said Wolf and all nodded in agreement.

Around and around the discussion went. There were many admirable suggestions about the attributes of leadership but no one could come up with a process for choosing. The Animal People lived in harmony and the idea of creating a hierarchy, of elevating one over the other, was beyond them. As the talk continued, they became discouraged and wondered if there was a respectful and honourable way to choose a leader. The day lengthened and evening started to slide across the sky, and still there was no consensus.

Then a small voice spoke. Everyone strained to hear, and when the voice was located, the Animal People separated and made way for the speaker to come forward. A small squirrel, Ajidimo, hopped slowly to the front of the throng and stood in the middle of the great circle of her peers. "There should be a race," Ajidimo said. "A race would show who exemplifies the qualities of leadership. A race requires perseverance, fortitude, strength, and a powerful will."

The circle of animals launched into a babble of discussion. Everyone was excited by this new possibility and, of course, many of the animals came forward to enter the race.

"It will be me," said Horse. "With my fleetness and strength, I will overcome any challenge and I will emerge the leader."

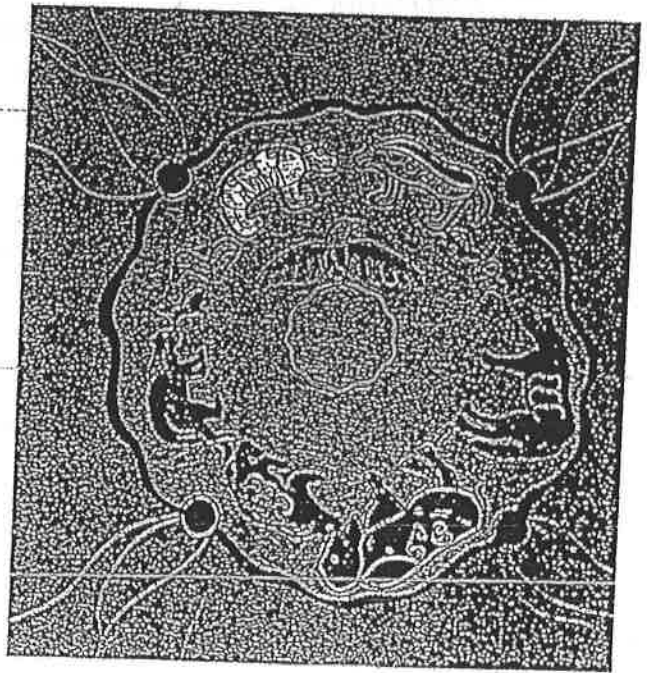
"You think too highly of yourself, my brother," said Buffalo. "It will be I who emerges victorious for no one has more stamina."

"What's needed is a discerning manner," said Cougar. "Your power is no match for my ability to cover territory with stealth. I will emerge as the leader because of my gift of patience."

"None can match my stealth," said Wolverine. "No one knows how to move secretly as much as I."

When no one else came forward, Eagle (who declined to enter the race because of his role as Messenger, carrying all prayers to Creator) called for quiet. He flapped down from the topmost branches of the tree he sat in and conferred with Mukwa the bear and Myeengun the wolf. They talked a long while. Finally, Eagle hopped into the centre of the circle and addressed the throng.

"There is a lake set between a circle of steep hills," Eagle said. "I have flown over it many times and it forms a perfect circle. The terrain is challenging: rocky, steep with



thick woods around it. The race will be four times around that lake. This will demand the utmost of the contestants, and the winner will indeed be the hardiest and most qualified to lead us."

The Animal People concurred that this was a remarkable plan. There was much excited talk about who of the four would emerge victorious. Then Eagle spoke again.

"Are there any other challengers? Is there anyone else who would like to contest for the right to lead us?"

"I would," said Wapoose, the rabbit. She hopped out of the crowd and sat looking at Eagle.

"You are small, my sister. Are you certain?" Eagle asked.

"Yes," Wapoose said. "It would be an honour to contest with such magnificent beings."

The animals worried that Wapoose was asking too much of herself, but she was determined so the five contestants headed for the lake with Eagle flying overhead as their guide. When they reached the lake, Eagle lined them up on the rocky shore. "Be careful," Eagle said. "I have never seen any of us try to navigate this lake before. The terrain is so difficult."

The bigger animals stamped hooves and clawed at the shore impatiently. Wapoose merely wriggled her nose and watched them. At a signal from Eagle, the race was on.

Horse neighed and reared up on his hind legs and then galloped off into the trees. Buffalo was right at his tail, and the others could hear them crashing through the trees. Wolverine scurried forward with his nose close to the ground and vanished like a shadow into the trees. Cougar loped easily after him and disappeared as well into the thick cover of the bush. Wapoose sat on her haunches and watched them leave, and, when she was ready, hopped off slowly into the trees. Eagle flapped up onto a ridge of rock to count the laps as they passed.

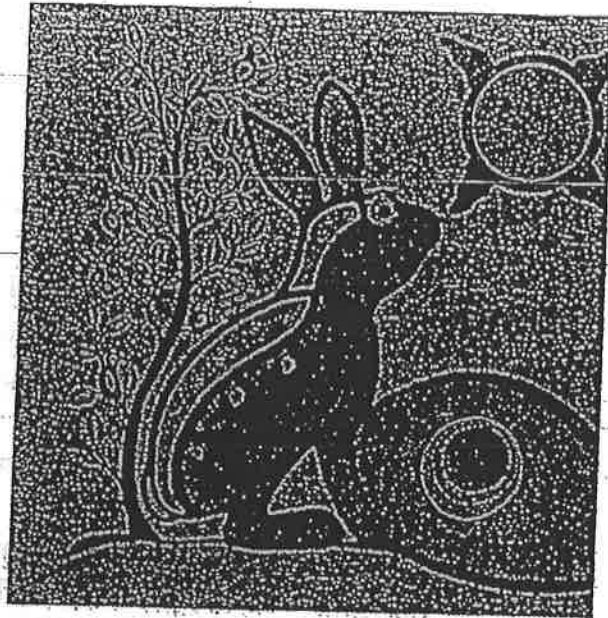
Horse and Buffalo were immensely strong and they made it back to the rocky shore in a virtual tie. They were scratched and cut from thrashing their way through the dense cover. They stopped to drink, and Cougar and Wolverine bounded out of the trees. They all drank and caught their breath and stared at each other to determine who might be wearied or weakened, or want to drop out. None of them did and they raced off on the second lap. Eagle stared back in the direction they'd come and worried about the tiny rabbit who still could not be seen. The larger animals had returned from their second lap and then raced off again before Wapoose hopped slowly from the trees.

"Oh, the land is so lovely," Wapoose said. "There is so much to see and the feeling of being on it is beautiful."

"You are far behind," Eagle said. "There is no way for you to ever catch up."

"Don't worry about me. I'm here to enjoy the challenge," Wapoose said. Then she took a small drink and continued on her way.

Eagle waited a long time for that third lap to conclude. It was Buffalo who emerged first but even his proud steps were plodding. The great animal slumped to the shore and drank thirstily, his breath between slurps coming hard and heaving. When he finished, Horse walked out of the trees. He too was worn out. They stood side by side at the water's edge while Wolverine and Cougar emerged from the dense cover together. They took sidelong glances at each



other but both were far too wearied to comment or challenge the other. Instead, they stood beside the other two animals and drank slowly. When they were finished, none of the great creatures seemed too eager to continue the race. They stared at the trees blankly. It was finally Horse who stepped out first. The others watched him go and only when he'd vanished into the bush did they move to follow. Eagle could only peer back wondering how Wapoose was doing on her second lap.

The others had been gone almost an hour before Wapoose hopped out of the trees. She was bright-eyed and energetic, and none of her fur had marks of struggle like the others. Again, she took a few small sips of water and sat on the shore admiring the look of the sun on the lake's surface.

"There is no way for you to win, my sister," Eagle said. "The others are on their final lap already. Perhaps it's best if you concede and stay here and wait to greet the winner along with me."

Wapoose nodded solemnly and continued to stare out at the lake. "It is not honouring the challenge if I should stop," she said. "It is a noble pursuit and it asks everything I have. So I will continue if that's all right with you."

"Certainly," Eagle said. "I only meant to spare you unnecessary struggle."

"It can never be struggle to engage in a noble cause," Wapoose said.

She hopped off after the other creatures. Eagle flapped his great wings and settled more firmly on the branch. He admired Wapoose. The rabbit was brave and respectful and carried a very humble way of looking at the world. She would have made a remarkable leader.

As Eagle sat in the tree, Wapoose ran nimbly along under the snags and tangles that hampered the bigger creatures. When she came to huge boulders, she sat and sniffed at the wind and found the air currents that told her the easiest path to follow. Where the way seemed impassable for someone of her size, she merely sat up on her haunches and eyed the territory until she found a pathway. She'd established a route on her

first two passes that allowed her to pick up speed. She blazed through open stretches and hopped boldly along the edge of chasms that seemed impossible for a creature so small. But she also took time to stop and admire the geography she passed through. She sat and gazed around at the magnificent sweep of the country and inhaled the crystalline air deeply into her, and she admired the interplay of shadow and light that was thrown everywhere around her. Then she would wriggle her nose and continue on her journey.

She hadn't gone far on her third lap when she encountered Wolverine. He was snagged in a crevice of rock where he'd been trying to take a shortcut over a ridge. He was furious, and Wapoose could hear him snarling and raging and tearing away at the rock with his long claws. But he was also very tired and he had to stop and catch his breath. During a lull, the rabbit spoke to him.

"Let go," Wapoose said. "All you have to do is let go and stop struggling. When you do, you will slide back down and you can begin again."

"What do you know, little one?" Wolverine snarled. "I am strong enough to claw my way out of here."

With that, Wolverine attacked the face of the crevice again. There was an awesome sound of claws on granite and his hard spit and snarl. But it was to no avail. He was trapped.

"Let go," Wapoose said again. "It may require all your strength to do that but it is your struggle itself that traps you."

Wolverine huffed. His breath was ragged. He peered down at Wapoose, who seemed so small at the foot of the drop. It was a long way down. He gazed up at the thin poke of blue sky at the head of the crevice, and he could feel the burning desire in him to breach it and continue the race. But he was exhausted. He took another look at Wapoose, and she seemed so calm and assured that he relaxed and quit fighting. Sure enough, Wolverine slid slowly back down the crevice and landed in the gravel and stone beside Wapoose. He flopped down on his belly and stretched his paws out. "Thank you," was all he had breath for.

Wapoose sat and waited while he regained his strength. Eventually Wolverine sat up. "It is lost," he said. "I am too tired to continue. I will not be the leader. I do not have what is required."

"The way I have found is easier," Wapoose said. "It takes longer but I make it all the way around without a struggle. I would be very happy if you accompanied me."

With that, Wolverine and Wapoose began to make their way. They hadn't travelled very far when they heard a great stamping and snorting in the trees. They followed the sound and came upon Horse tangled in a thicket of blackberry bushes. The thorns were cutting into his flesh, and the pain drove him to kick and buck relentlessly. He

was covered in sweat. Again, when Horse had ceased his immense struggle and calmed some, Wapoose spoke.

"The branches are individual," she said to Horse. "If you pass through them one at a time, there is less resistance. Taken together, they are a strong barrier."

"What do you know?" Horse asked. "You are not even in contention in this race."

"That is true but I know that barriers such as this are built of many parts," Wapoose said. "When I hop through them, I learned to be patient and push against one piece at a time. We will show you."

Wapoose led Wolverine to the edge of the thicket. She paused and directed Wolverine to place his paw against one slim branch. A line of blackberry shoots fell forward. Then she hopped a few steps further and showed Wolverine where to place another paw. More of a pathway opened up. Eventually they worked their way right up to Horse who neighed in relief and followed them back out the opening. When they stood in the clear again, Wapoose and Wolverine could see how many cuts Horse had inflicted on himself in the thicket.

"Buffalo and Cougar went by me and did not stop to help," Horse said. "That angered me. I fought against the bushes, but they would not relent."

"Things bend any number of ways," Wapoose said. "You learn this when you spend time close to the Earth as I do."

"Thank you," Horse said.

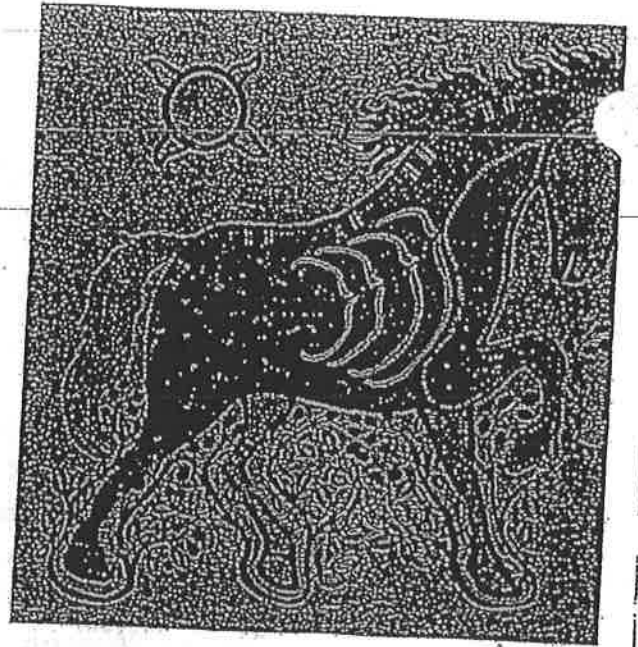
"We are travelling together now," Wapoose said. "The way I found is easier to navigate but takes more time. You're welcome to join us, of course."

"I'd like that," Horse said. "I'm very tired."

The three of them ventured off, with Wapoose hopping casually in the lead. She led them on a path that wound its way gently around and through many barriers. They were grateful for the respite. But they hadn't gone far when they could hear Buffalo snorting angrily. They followed the sound and came upon him belly deep in a bog. Buffalo kicked and thrashed, but his efforts only sank him deeper into the slick, oily muck. When he saw them on the edge of the bog, he stopped and looked at them.

"How did you come to be in there?" Horse asked.

"I thought it was a shortcut," Buffalo said. "Cougar was bounding ahead of me and I thought that I could save time by cutting through a gap. I was belly deep before I knew it."



"Can you stand?" Wapoose asked.

"Yes," Buffalo said. "Why?"

"If you can stand there calmly, you won't sink any further and we will work together to get you out of there."

"Are you certain?" Buffalo asked. "I feel the bog pull at me even now."

"I am not certain," Wapoose said. "But trust does not require certainty."

With that, she hopped to a clutch of cedar trees and worked her way among them. Horse and Wolverine followed her and watched while she searched about. She came to a tree that had a root showing through the soil. Wapoose chewed at the root, and when she'd eaten through it, she asked Wolverine to come at it with his great claws. He pawed at the soil and exposed a good length of root. Then Wapoose directed Horse to take the exposed root in his teeth and back up slowly to pull it from the ground. When he did this, they could see that there was enough root to reach out to where Buffalo stood mired in the muck.

"Take this in your teeth and swim out to Buffalo," Wapoose said to Wolverine.

"Have him take it in his teeth and climb up on his back. Horse will pull you both out."

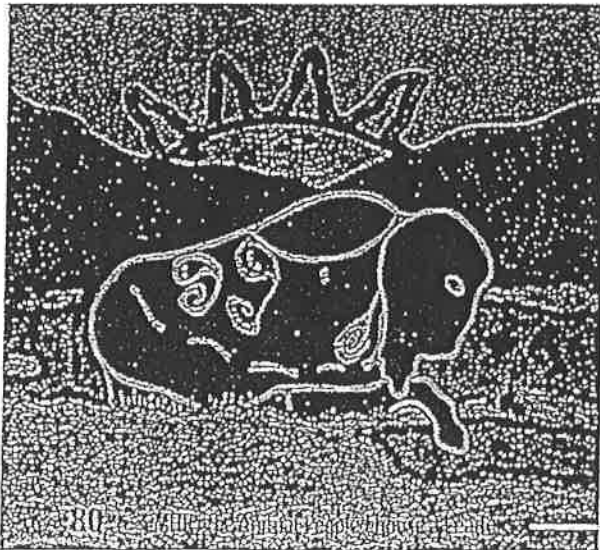
"But I might sink before I reach him," Wolverine said.

"Perhaps," said Wapoose. "But everything asks sacrifice of us. You must sacrifice your doubt now to help your brother."

"Are you sure?" Wolverine asked.

"No," Wapoose said. "But I am not the one who has to be."

Wolverine took the root in his jaws and waded into the mud. He felt it clutch at him but he worked his way slowly to Buffalo, and, while the great beast took the root in his mouth, Wolverine climbed onto his back. Slowly, Horse backed away from the edge of the bog. Horse and Wapoose could see the two of them come closer and closer to safety. Finally Buffalo's hooves caught. He struggled but walked out of the bog and stood glistening with muck. Wolverine hopped from his back and did a celebratory dance around his bigger brother.



"How did you know to find the root?" Buffalo asked.

"You discover much when you learn to look at things," Wapoose said.

Buffalo nodded. "I suppose Cougar has finished the last lap. He will be our leader now. I'm exhausted. I don't know if I can make it back."

"We have been making our way around together on the route that Wapoose found,"

Wolverine said. "It is longer, but less arduous than the ones we found. You're welcome to join us as well."

Buffalo agreed and the four friends resumed their loop around the lake. They came upon Cougar flopped on a large flat boulder, clearly exhausted. He lay on his side with his tongue lolling out and his breath coming in slow, shallow pants. His fur was matted and torn from negotiating his way through the territory, and his eyes were half closed.

"I'm spent," Cougar said when they approached him. "I went too fast for too long and the effort has robbed me of all my strength. I don't know if I have energy to stand, let alone make it to the finish line. I've failed."

"There is no failure when judgment does not exist," Wapoose said softly.

"What do you mean?" Cougar asked.

"I mean that we do not judge you. We contested with you and we have no judgment. Neither does Creator. So it is not possible for you to have failed."

"But I did not complete the journey."

"Yet," Wapoose said. "We will carry you."

Buffalo stepped up to the rock and Cougar eased onto his broad back. The five of them continued their walk around the lake. Wapoose led them along and they marvelled at the leisure they found in the route she had discovered. When Buffalo's energy flagged, he moved beside another high boulder and Horse allowed Cougar to climb onto his back. Eventually, even Wolverine was near collapse and Buffalo carried him while he rested his head on his brother's great hump. Wapoose hopped nimbly along ahead of them. Together the five contestants made their way slowly back to the shore where Eagle waited. When he saw them, he flapped his great wings in celebration. They crossed the finish line together.

"It is a great day," Eagle said when told of Wapoose's direction.

"But we do not have a leader," Wolverine said.

"I think we do," Eagle said and they all looked at Wapoose.

"Oh, I do not want to be the leader," Wapoose said.

"But you entered the contest," Buffalo said.

"I entered to learn what I did not know," said Wapoose. "I did not enter to contend."

"What was it you sought to learn?" Horse asked.

"I understood the meaning of leader," Wapoose said. "But I did not understand the territory."

"And now?" Eagle asked.

Wapoose wriggled her nose. "I understand that when all our energies are directed toward the same goal, there is no need for one to lead. We all help each other complete the journey."

"You are wise," said Eagle.

"I am Wapoose," she said. "This is all I know for certain."

"Then truly you are wise," Eagle said, and the others murmured their agreement. Wapoose hopped off a few steps toward the line of forest at the end of the beach.

"Where are you going?" they all yelled together.

"To complete the journey," Wapoose said. "I have one more lap to go."

"But there is no need," Buffalo said.

"But there is much I have not seen or learned," Wapoose said. "It is in the journey that one comes to understand the territory. It is in the journey that one becomes wise and I have one more lap to go."

They watched her disappear and after they had drank their fill and rested, they stood at the break in the trees and waited while Wapoose completed her trek around the lake. When she returned, they welcomed her. Eagle scooped her up in his strong talons and placed her on Buffalo's back, and together they walked back to the Animal People bearing a great story and a great teaching.

What Inspired Me to Write This Selection

“ This story came from a desire to bring the traditional oral form to a contemporary setting and audience. I wanted to write a story that reflected the teaching tales of my people. I wanted to show that our traditions are alive and well, while entertaining people at the same time. ”

After

- 1. Metacognition** Reread the story, paying attention to the timeline you created. How did rereading the story, with the aid of a timeline, help you to understand the story better?
- 2. Critical Literacy** This story is told from the point of view of a third-person narrator.
 - a) How does this point of view affect the way the story is told?
 - b) How would the story be different if it was told from the point of view of Wapoose?
- 3. Reading for Meaning** Wapoose says, "It is in the journey that one comes to understand the territory. It is in the journey that one becomes wise"
 - a) What are other insightful statements made by Wapoose in this story?
 - b) Which statement do you like the most? Why?
- 4. Student Voice** How does your view of leadership compare to the one presented in the story?

Beyond

Listening and Speaking Create a soundscape or music list to accompany an oral retelling of this story. Present the story orally with your soundscape or music list.



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1. List some of the attributes of leadership that the Animal People come up with.

2. The story states that the Animal People lived in harmony, not in a hierarchy where one person is greater than all. What do you think hierarchy means? Look it up to check its meaning.

3. Who are the contestants for leadership in the race? What qualities does each contestant possess that makes them a suitable leader?

Buffalo –

Cougar-

Horse –

Wolverine -

4. Why are the animals concerned about Wapoose competing in the race?

5. How many laps have the other contestants completed before Wapoose finishes her first lap?

6. For each of the Animal People in the chart below, identify why they are not able to complete the race on their own, and describe how Wapoose is able to help them.

Animal	Obstacle	Solution/Wapoose's Advice
Buffalo		
Horse		
Wolverine		
Cougar		

7. The approach that Wapoose uses to win the race is much different than the other Animal People. Describe how her approach is different.

8. Although Wapoose does not want to be the leader of the Animal People, she would make a good leader. Based on the actions in this story, what qualities does she have that would make her a good leader. Include at least 3 examples.

9. Wapoose is a wise creature despite her small size. Throughout the story she dispenses helpful and thoughtful advice. In the space below, identify at least three pieces of advice, and explain how they could connect with your life today. For each piece of advice, write down the quotation, and in at least 3 sentences, explain how that advice relates to your own life and experiences.

10. In the space below, record at least 10 main plot points in order. You may choose to use a time line, or a chronological list, or any other appropriate format.
