We Come From the Stars

Indigenous stories about the night sky reveal more than just its beauty—they can help us learn lessons, build community, and better understand who we are

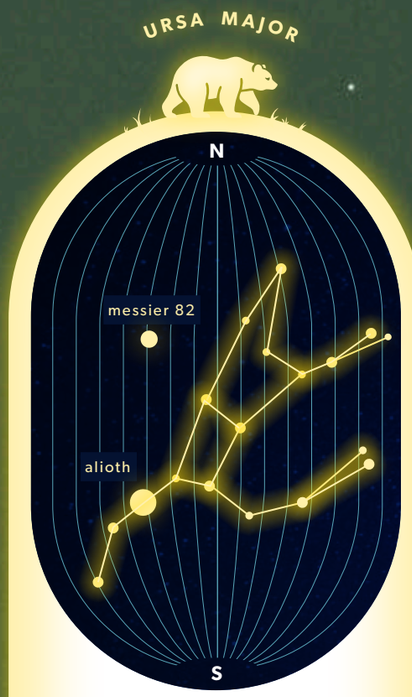
BY DAVID A. ROBERTSON

ILLUSTRATION LUKE SWINSON

FEW THINGS ARE more beautiful than the night sky. It's why I prefer the country; there's no street lights that rise into the air like fog. The pervasive darkness on the land reveals the stars and the moon so profoundly it's as if somebody turned Mother Nature's dimmer switch to full power. But what do we see when we look up?

I ask that when I speak to students about *The Misewa Saga*, my six-part, middle-grade fantasy series. I often ask what the first constellation they think of is, and I will ask you the same thing. There is a high probability that you thought of the Big Dipper, or more accurately, Ursa Major, which the International Astronomical Union (IAU) acknowledges as a construct of a eurocentric system. It may strike you as odd, but we must decolonize the night sky. Indigenous Peoples have an entirely different way of conceiving of the constellations, specifically the Ininiwak (Cree people; that's my background), who are rich in stories of the sky. Elders who know about the night sky will say there is a story for every star and every constellation and that every star has a name and a teaching attached. Those teachings are not in place only to benefit Ininiwak.

I learned most of what I know about the stars from the work of Wilfred Buck, a Cree astronomer based in Winnipeg, Man., and one of the foremost Indigenous star story experts. I was lucky to work with Wilfred at the Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre (MFNERC) in Winnipeg. Since then, I have witnessed a growing interest in his expertise. I created educational resources during my tenure as the publishing manager at MFNERC, and together we printed the first version of his excellent book *Tipiskawi Kisik: Night Sky Star Stories*, a collection of traditional constellation tales. ››



KNOWN IN CREE AS

Mistahimuskwa

THE BIRD WARRIORS AND THE BEAR

The Great Bear

The Great Bear constellation, from an Indigenous perspective, includes Ursa Major. The thrilling story of this constellation addresses the realities of bullying. But at the same time, it explains how the robin got its red breast.

There was a terrifying bear that roamed the woods in the north country, pillaging and destroying villages wherever it went and killing whoever got in its way. It would take whatever it wanted, with no regard for anybody else. This behaviour continued for a very long time until animals living in the villages grew tired of the great bear and decided to stand up against it so that it would never ruin another home or injure another animal. The next time the great bear threatened a village, the animals who lived there refused to back down. Because all bullies are cowards, when faced with such brave resistance, the bear turned and ran away instead of staying and fighting. Seven bird warriors chased after the bear, determined not to give the once-feared animal another opportunity to harm another village (the bird warriors themselves are from a constellation called Corona Borealis). Robin, one of the bird warriors, struck the bear with its sword, causing a wound across its chest. The injury caused blood to stain the robin's breast red, previously white. ››

The Fisher Stars

Everybody has their favourite star story. Mine is *Ochekatchakosuk*, or the Fisher Stars. Wilfred and I learned a version of this story from Murdo Scribe, a Cree Elder from my hometown, Norway House Cree Nation, in northern Manitoba. A significant portion of the constellation encompasses Ursa Major. As the Big Dipper goes, the spoon's bent handle is the fisher's broken tail. Way more interesting, right? It gets better.

In an area of the north, it was winter all the time. This was because long ago, a man stole the summer birds, which are responsible for the changing of the seasons. For as long as he held the birds, summer would not come. Animals who lived in villages across the northern country were dying of starvation because food sources were scarce due to the weather, and, at last, the fisher, the greatest hunter in the village, volunteered to find and rescue the summer birds. The animal travelled a long distance until finally he found where the man lived, in a wigwam with the sandhill crane. While the man was away, the crane watched the summer birds to ensure nobody tried to save them. The fisher crawled into the wigwam and glued the sandhill crane's beak shut so he couldn't warn the man of what was happening. The fisher then chewed through the sack where the birds were being held, setting them free. As the birds flew away, the crane broke free from the glue and cried out, "The fisher has stolen the summer birds! Come quick! The fisher has freed the summer birds!" The man came running, and the fisher took off. The animal ran desperately back towards his home while the man shot arrow after arrow at him. He eventually jumped towards the sky, and just before he got away, he was struck in the tail with an arrow and fell earthward. Before hitting the ground and dying, the Creator caught him and placed him in the sky to honour his sacrifice.

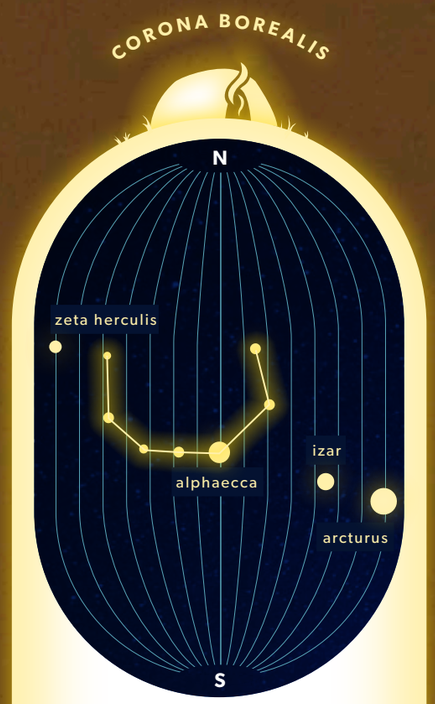
There are a few things to unpack. The story itself speaks to the connections we forge. Connections are possible within and between Indigenous cultures, and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples. When I was researching these stories, something that struck me was all the variations of the Fisher Stars story. There were versions of it from Ontario, from an Anishinaabe storyteller named Isaac Murdoch; from Manitoba, from Wilfred Buck and Murdo Scribe; and out farther west too. The stories were told differently; details changed here and there. But the heart of the story is constant. There's a never-ending winter, the fisher volunteers to save the day, and the poor animal gets shot in the tail (the puncture wound in his tail is the star Alcor).

How can the story be told within many communities and by different storytellers? It indicates that other groups of Indigenous Peoples came together and shared things. *Ochekatchakosuk* also carries the same message: if you take too much from the land, there are consequences. While it was the man who stole the summer birds, since we all live on the land, we are all impacted by what is done to it. It constantly amazes me that we had stories hundreds of years ago about environmental impacts and climate change, which are relevant concerns today. ››

The Sweat Lodge

I'm partial to the previous two star stories since I adapted both in *The Misewa Saga*, which was initially supposed to be a trilogy. The fisher stars became *The Barren Grounds*, and the big bear became *The Great Bear* (original title, I know). But what of *The Stone Child*, the third book? Well, that one is based on a story influenced by *matootisan* or the sweat lodge (also part of the Corona Borealis).

A young man went off on his own into the northern woods after his seven uncles, who had gone hunting, didn't return. Their spirits had been stolen and placed into seven rocks by *mistapew*, known in English as Bigfoot. The young man journeyed deep into the woods and became tired from the long trek, eventually deciding to go to sleep. While dreaming, all seven uncles appeared to him and told him how he could save them. He was taught how to construct a *matootisan* out of willow and perform a ceremony to release their spirits so they could travel to the Happy Hunting Grounds. When the young man woke up, he dutifully made a domed structure, the sweat lodge, and then heated the rocks until they were white hot. When they had been heated, he brought them to the centre of the sweat lodge and poured water on them, one by one, while singing and praying. He watched as his uncles' spirits rose from the rocks, finally released from their stony prisons. The young man was honoured by the Creator, who gave him the ceremony that could be used to heal, and he was also renamed Assini Awasis, or Stone Child.



KNOWN IN CREE AS

Matootisan

I **LOVE THAT** there are things we see every day that reveal so much. If you're lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time, the evening sky, stars, the moon, and the northern lights are some of those things. The stories are easy to find, as easy to find as the stars, or a certain direction when following Keewatin, the Going Home Star, more commonly known as the North Star. It sits stationary in the sky and is traditionally a navigational tool. I also love that, even though we come from different cultures, we speak different languages and have different values, beliefs, traditions, and ceremonies, we share more than we think. Call it sentimental or that I've ripped a scene from *An American Tail*, but I find it comforting to know that we see the same thing when we look at the sky.

If you are out by the lake, where the harsh lights of the city are nowhere to be seen, where the sky and its endless beauty reveal themselves to you unfettered, try sitting in the silence and the calm the night can bring. Hopefully, the mosquitoes aren't too bad. Look up at the sky, trace constellations in your mind, and connect them to stories that you have learned. It makes them come alive, teaches us how things are, and shows us how things can be.

Decolonizing can be intimidating, but Indigenizing something doesn't exclude others from the experience that is possible with our stories. Quite the opposite, it is an open invitation.

David A. Robertson is the author of numerous award-winning books for young readers. He lives in Winnipeg.