A large white bison is the central focus, its head and neck filling the left and center of the frame. The bison is looking slightly to the right. In the foreground, a large, dark, textured rock sits on the right side, with a white bison skull resting on top of it. The background is a vast, open field under a cloudy sky. The overall tone is somber and respectful.

Spirit of the White Bison

30th Anniversary Edition

Beatrice Mosionier

Foreword by David Alexander Robertson

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White Bison
Anniversary Edition

Beatrice Mosionier

Illustrations by Robert Kakaygeesick Jr.

With a foreword by David Alexander Robertson



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Foreword

Anywhere we are is framed by where we have been. That's one of the truths I try to work from when I'm writing; anything I've created is firmly grounded in respect and acknowledgment of history – yours, mine, ours.

The first time I met Beatrice Mosionier was at a joint book launch for my book, *The Life of Helen Betty Osborne*, and her memoir, *Come Walk With Me*. I was indescribably nervous. Beatrice was (and is) an icon of Indigenous literature, and I'd read her book, *April Raintree*, about a million times. Now, here I was, about to launch a book alongside her. It was a dream come true. We sat together for a pre-launch bite to eat, and my nervousness subsided as I quickly discovered how genuine, kind, and gentle Beatrice is. But perhaps what also helped to quell my anxiety was the realization that she and I were kindred writing souls. Her work speaks the same truth that I try to write about: we are nowhere else but where we have been, individually and as a people. Beatrice's writings continually frame that truth – beautifully and powerfully.

Beatrice often speaks of blood memory – the history that rushes through our own veins, indelible memories of a past that walks with us, within us. *Spirit of the White Bison* is part of that pulse. On the surface, it is a simple tale that weaves its way through the latter part of the 19th century. The story begins at a time when life is cyclical and innocent and ends with the grim certainty that life is changing forever; the cycle is breaking. Of course, the simplest stories are often the richest, the lines within each of the paragraphs

staying with us as permanently as pink ribbon scars. Indeed, *Spirit of the White Bison* moves forward with the same poetry and rhythm as those markings on our skin. Little White Buffalo watches first as her brethren are taken, out of necessity, to provide sustenance, to provide life. In this, there is honour and acceptance. The cycle of life continues. Soon, though, things change. Newcomers begin to lay a path of destruction, and the land becomes littered with the carcasses of Little White Buffalo's family; her mother, her father, her siblings, her extended family. The loss is senseless. Death no longer leads to life, but to waste. The cycle is broken.

There is a great vitality in Beatrice's storytelling, and there needs to be. For as each page cuts deeper with truth – the changes we witness in this book lead to a devastating change in how our Aboriginal ancestors lived and, certainly, how we live today – there is a plea in the prose, and in that plea a hope for change. It is saying: learn from this.

Go back to the beginning: anywhere we are is framed by where we have been. In *Spirit of the White Bison*, we recognize another truth: anywhere we have yet to go is framed by what we have learned. The spirit of Little White Buffalo lives on, in visions and in dreams, to remind us not only of what has been done, but what can be done. This is how change occurs.

Recently, an elder told me that the result of this change is not something we will see in our lifetime, but over several generations. This change will occur in different ways, one of which is through sharing our stories and the lessons we have learned from the stories we have heard, from the stories we have read. *Spirit of the White Bison* is one of these stories. It is a story to be passed from one generation to the next. It is a story of loss, to be sure, but looking closer reveals more. Through it, we can learn of how positive change occurs through acceptance – when we can exist with, not against, each other. Then, we can repair the broken cycle and begin it anew.

— David Robertson

Introduction

I have a confession to make. When I decided to write this book, I had just watched *Watership Down*, an animated movie about rabbits. We should have an Aboriginal story that could become an animation, I thought. What animal should I write about, I wondered. Then I remembered that some time after I had moved to my second foster home in St. Norbert, when I was around five or six, I had told a lie.

My foster brother and I were given the job of stacking firewood. As we worked, I told Charles that at my previous foster home, I had all the animals in the world, and they had all followed me when I moved here. Because rue l'Eglise was too narrow for all of them to come farther, we parted at the highway. I probably got the idea from hearing about Noah's Ark. I told Charles my favourite animal was a white bison.

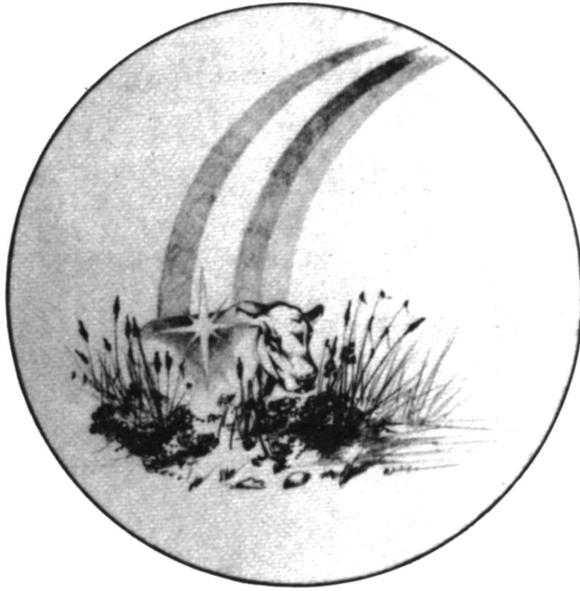
I got out my typewriter, set it up on the kitchen table, and that very Sunday afternoon, I began to write about my white bison. With no plan in mind, I began typing, and, almost immediately, I became the little white bison. I saw what she saw, felt what she felt, and heard what she heard. At suppertime, I stopped typing, but after my kids went to bed, I began writing again. The words just flowed out of me onto the pages. It was as if my white bison had been waiting all this time to tell me her story. The flow of words was quite amazing, because I didn't consider myself a writer. I thought I had just gotten really lucky with my first novel, *In Search of April Raintree*.

On Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, I had to work. At night, though, as soon as my kids went to bed, I was back at the typewriter. By Wednesday night, I had finished the story. While I hadn't begun this story in a spiritual way, it became so as I wrote. At one point, Little White Buffalo encounters a cougar. I had to stop and think about how I would deal with this incident. I recalled that when I was seven or eight years old, an instinctive knowledge came to me that I had three animal guardians or guides: the wolf, the bear, and the cougar.

Now I was stymied, because I didn't want to depict one of my guardian animals in a negative way. Then, it came to me that since I'd be writing about the white man's destructive ways I would use the encounter with the cougar to introduce at least one compassionate white man into the story.

With no Aboriginal teachings, or any kind of Aboriginal connection, I didn't know then about blood memory, also called "bone memory." It's a collective memory that passes down through generations, and it's not written down or taught. This traditional knowledge helped me rewrite an important part of our history, through the eyes of a white bison, named Little White Buffalo.

CHAPTER 1



Mama told me I was born on a warm spring day. It was in late afternoon after a brief shower, and I was born under a rainbow. Mama said that made me special. I didn't feel special when I was young. I only felt very different. My name was the reason. I was called Little White Buffalo. And it was, of course, because my coat was white, unlike all the other buffalo, whose coats ranged from tan to dark brown.

The other youngsters in my group refused to let me play with them, and the only time they paid attention to me was when they teased me and pushed me around. But I found other playmates like the birds and the prairie dogs, and I did enjoy the games we played.

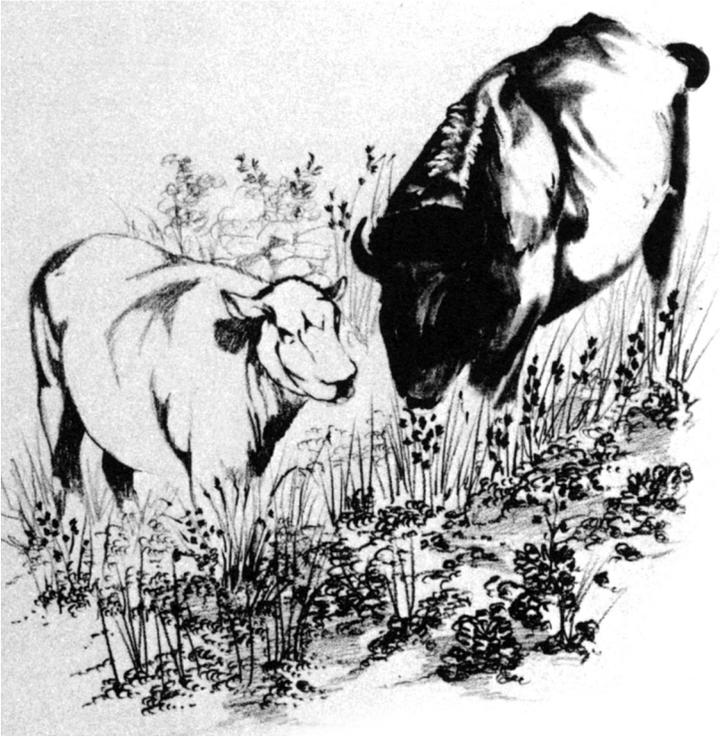
Most days, I spent suckling milk and pretending I was nibbling at the prairie grasses. Mama would tell me which plants not to eat. It was very important to pay strict attention to whatever we were taught. It could be that we wouldn't have a second try at the lessons. I could run as fast as the older bulls and cows and faster than most

of the younger buffalo, because sometimes they all chased me, and I had to outrun them. In our herd, there were millions of other buffalo, I reckoned. Sometimes, I would get lost among a strange group, and I'd have to yell my loudest for Mama to come find me. Great Bison, the bull who had sired me and my many half-brothers and half-sisters, was the largest, strongest bull in our group, and it was natural for him to be our group leader. While the older ones made sure I was well looked after, they didn't bother protecting me from the other youngsters. I guess they thought we ought to settle our differences amongst ourselves. The problem for me was that I was one against many. Of course, if I had stayed by my mother's side, they wouldn't have bothered me. Mama would have made sure of that. Then again, perhaps she would have made me go out there and stand up for myself.

The older bison were very kind to me. Many of them were brothers and sisters and uncles and aunts. The wolves sometimes came down to stalk us, mostly at calving time. Then the older bison would help the mothers protect us. Once in a while the wolves did get one of us, but that was only if there was a sickness or injury that made a calf unable to move quickly enough. And there were grizzly bears that wandered into our territory, tempted by the possibility of young buffalo venison. We were taught to always keep watch no matter what we were doing.

But not even the older buffalo could give protection when the buffalo hunters swooped down on us on horseback. Then the whole herd would begin to move, slowly at first, but soon the prairies would echo with the thundering beat of our hooves. It was scary but exciting. Whenever this happened, Mama made sure we remained close together. The hunters used bows and arrows, and they rode in among the running buffalo. If a hunter got close enough we could hear his hunting cries above the sounds of our hooves hitting earth. Sometimes the hunters were silent, though, and all we could hear were heavy, laboured breathing and the steady drumming of hoofbeats as the herd sought to put distance between itself and the danger.

Once, a horse and rider went down just in front to my left. I guess the horse must have stepped in a gopher hole. I heard both



the horse and rider scream in agony as the buffalo behind pounded over them. I was glad I hadn't been behind them. It was all over very quickly, which was probably fortunate for them. While there was danger to us from hunters, there was also danger to them. Once, I had seen a slow-moving wolf gored to death by a bull. Full-grown bison did not have many enemies to fear.

But full-grown bison had no defense against the two-legged hunters. On one of the hunts, an aunt went down with arrows lodged deep in the mass of her shaggy coat. When the hunters finally left us alone, everything began to quiet down. Many of the younger bison and a few of the older ones stopped to catch their wind and rest. My aunt's little calf, who was maybe a month younger than me, spent a long time crying for his Mama and wandering through the group, looking for her. When my Mama finally realized that my little cousin's mother was not coming back, she went to comfort and nurse him. His name was Bison Boy, and he became my little brother. He was the youngest of our whole group and also the smallest.

Big Ben and his friends were all older or bigger than Bison Boy and me. It was natural for them to want to bully us around. Because I was older than Bison Boy, it was my place to watch out for him. One day, I was returning from playing with some gophers when I was stopped in my tracks by Bison Boy's voice. "Leave me alone. Please?" he was pleading.

An uncle, unconcerned by Big Ben and his friends' mischief, as we often developed our skills for defense by such play fights, was grazing calmly. He stood between the group and me. Their attention was on Bison Boy, and they did not notice me. As I watched, Big Ben and his friends took turns at battering Bison Boy from all sides. Bison Boy would go down, and they'd wait for him to get up before one of them charged at him again. It was purely mean of them. It went beyond the usual head-butting. Now, Big Ben was older and bigger than me, as I said before, but I was mad. I charged out and aimed myself directly at Big Ben's shoulder. Big Ben, intent on Bison Boy, didn't see me coming until the last minute, and by then it was too late. I hit him with my full weight, and he went down. Before he could recover, I charged at him again. I bowled him over, and this time he was able to get to his feet. He shook his head and looked at me. I was ready to charge again. Seeing my anger, he turned and trotted off.

The others, surprised by my intrusion, looked at Big Ben's departing form, then back at Bison Boy and me. I stood my ground, ready to accept any of their challenges. They made none and left to join Big Ben. I turned my attention to Bison Boy. He was having trouble getting up. One of his legs had been twisted or sprained. We didn't think it was broken, but he could only limp painfully. For a youngster, or any animal, to be hurt was serious, very serious. Survival on the plains and in the wilderness meant one had to be fit at all times. Bison Boy and I know this very well from our past observations. In his present condition, Bison Boy would be a prime target if the wolves came. What I had to do, and quickly, was to find Mama and bring her to Bison Boy. Just as I was about to leave, we heard sounds – and I knew it was too late.