



**Solomon's Tree**  
Andrea Spalding  
Janet Wilson, illustrator

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## The Story

Solomon has a special friendship with the big old maple outside his house. He knows the tree in all seasons and all weathers. When a terrible storm tears it up by its roots, Solomon is devastated. But through the healing process of making a mask with his uncle, a Tsimpshian carver, Solomon learns that the cycle of life continues and so does the friendship between himself and the tree.

## The Author and the Carver

Tsimpshian master-carver Victor Reece inspired well-known author Andrea Spalding to write *Solomon's Tree* after she participated in his mask-carving workshop. He then created a special mask for the story and shared every step of the process with the author and illustrator. The mask itself will be handed down to Victor's son, Solomon. Examples of Victor's work are found in international museums and galleries, including the Canadian Museum of Civilization. While Andrea carved in Victor's workshop, she became aware that she had received a cultural gift, one that she is honored to be able to pass on through her story. Both Andrea and Victor live with their families on Pender Island in British Columbia.

## The Illustrator

Janet Wilson lives in Eden Mills, Ontario, but she spent several days on Pender Island and took many rolls of photos as she prepared to paint the pictures for *Solomon's Tree*. Janet is a prolific and award-winning illustrator for whom each book is a new journey. For *Solomon's Tree* she worked in oils on canvas and on wood, researching each detail.

## Use of First Nations Material in the Classroom

The subject of First Nations is on all elementary school curricula, but whenever possible it should be acknowledged, not just as a subject, but with respect for the people themselves and their current way of life. In urban communities, some First Nations children and adults may not be connected to their First Nation culture. In some cases, children may be living in foster

homes or with adoptive parents where they may have had little or no access to their culture. Sensitivity and discretion on the part of teachers are required to avoid putting either children or adults on the spot. No First Nations children, whatever their living circumstances, should be pressured to take a leadership role or even to participate, when First Nations culture and history are being taught. That said, a few suggestions follow for exploring a First Nations culture in the classroom. Some of these suggestions would only work if the class included a child or children who were enthusiastic about sharing their culture. Others could be introduced independently.

- In almost every classroom there is at least one child with First Nation's heritage. Their families may or may not have a connection to their heritage. Talk with the parents and ask if they would be willing to share some of their traditions.
- Could they or their child show the class some regalia or other cultural objects used for feasts or ceremonies? A wise elder can help children learn about the value and respect given to all these special things. Tools used for carving, hunting, cooking and weaving can all hold special meaning and significance to the community.
- British Columbia has twenty-six distinct First Nations languages all with their own unique culture and history. Although many nations have similar traditions like mask carving the meaning behind the masks and the carving style can vary drastically from Nation to Nation. Have your class identify the different Nations in your area and look at some of the ways they are similar and some of the ways they are different.
- In almost every town or city there is a Native Friendship Center and many universities have First Nations education programs. Ask people in these kinds of institutions about local aboriginal community protocols. First Nations community members such as First Nations politicians, artists, elders, educators and food gatherers can provide insight into the current and traditional lifestyle of the people. An afternoon with any person who continues to practice some of the traditional crafts such as weaving, net mending or tool making can be a valuable experience.

- Rent a video from the Native Friendship Center, or from the National Film Board catalogue highlighting some aspect of a First Nation culture, or telling a traditional story. Organize a field trip to a local museum or art gallery that has a First Nations display. Bring in some books showing the art of local First Nations. Do an art lesson using local art as inspiration.
- Visit the Canadian Museum of Civilization website at [www.civilizations.ca](http://www.civilizations.ca) and search for Tsimshian.
- Visit the Tsimshian Tribal Council website at [www.kitsumkalum.bc.ca](http://www.kitsumkalum.bc.ca).
- Solomon helped his uncle carve a mask out of wood. But there are other ways of trying mask making. Carve a face out of Plasticene using wooden or plastic tools. Carve a face out of plaster using metal carving tools. Make a mask from white glue and layers of tissue paper on one side of a blown up balloon. When dry, pop the balloon, cut out eye and breathing holes and add hair.

### **Other Ideas to Use with *Solomon's Tree***

- Choose a tree in your neighbourhood. If it could talk, what would it say? What would you say back? Draw, paint or write about your tree. If your tree fell down, what would be the most special thing that you could make out of the wood? Write about what you would make and how you would make it.
- Look at the strip panels under the text on each page. Read the explanation of them on the last page. Create a strip panel that represents you and your family or your friends. Write a paragraph explaining it.
- What would you like to learn to make? Find a workshop or class that you could take with a parent or friend where you could learn how. Sign up!
- Mask-making is a tradition for Solomon's family and in his Tsimshian heritage. Consider your own heritage. Are there any traditions that you could learn about? Quilting? Perhaps your class could make a quilt together. A certain kind of music? Perhaps a group of you could put on a

performance. View some of Victor Reece's masks by going to <http://www.gulfislandsarts.com/gallery/reece-gallery.htm>

- Janet Wilson has illustrated many other books. Gather them together. Look for similarities and differences. Show your class some of Janet's illustrations interspersed with other Canadian illustrators' work. See if they can pick out hers. See if they can explain how they knew. Look at the year of publication for each of her books. Has her style evolved in any way? If so, how?
- Andrea Spalding has written many other picture books and novels. Gather them together. You will notice that she and Janet Wilson have worked together before. Read the books that interest you and share one with your class, showing them why they would enjoy it.
- Both Janet Wilson and Andrea Spalding have won lots of awards. Look up the awards that they have won and then look for other books that have won the same awards. Read several and compare. (The internet is a good place to find out about awards. [www.canscaip.org](http://www.canscaip.org) is a good source.)

### **A Few Words from the Author**

*Solomon's Tree* was inspired by a remarkable few days I spent at a mask-making workshop given by my friend Tsimpshian master carver Victor Reece.

Like me, Victor and his family live on Pender Island, one of British Columbia's southern Gulf Islands. It is a small island and everyone is very involved in the community. Victor wanted to raise an honor pole for his grandmother and asked women of Pender if they would like to help. So many women volunteered that we ended up carving and raising three poles in what became known as The Bear Mother Project. The project took over two years to complete, but the beautiful finished poles now grace the entrance to our community hall.

Victor believes in sharing aspects of his culture to promote understanding, and during one carving afternoon Victor asked if anyone would like to learn how to carve a basic mask. Several of us were interested, so a date was set.

Carving a mask is totally different from carving a pole. Poles are large and many people help. The tree we were working on was enormous. There was

room to make mistakes and someone else was always willing to help fix them. Mask carving is an individual process between the carver and a single log. Mistakes are not easily corrected.

We gathered in the workshop. Victor took down his drum and called in the ancestors to help us. We needed their help. We danced to the drumbeat and thought about our log and the face it would reveal to us. As I began carving, I realized that peeling away layers of wood was like shedding layers of skin. It became a personal journey to be in touch with the spirit of the tree and see what it showed me.

It was also a cultural journey. We moved through the basic steps of transforming our log the way Victor's uncle had taught him, age-old methods of measurement and cutting as taught by his uncle's uncle's uncle, far back in time. While we worked, Victor told us stories of his village and of his grandmother who also believed in sharing to promote understanding between cultures. He told us traditional stories that she had shared with him when he was a child.

As I listened, the wood curled away under my fingers as though it was peeling layers from my inner eyes, opening a window in my mind showing me glimpses of another way of life.

The physical action of carving was hard. My wrists soon became stiff and my fingers clumsy. I gazed with envy when Victor took my tool to demonstrate. The wood parted as though he was cutting butter. When I tried the same movement, the tool stuck and pulled. I hacked and jerked against the grain until I learned to flow with the growth lines. To work with the wood instead of against it.

I got tired and my hands and wrists hurt. I remember pacing outside the woodshed angry at how inept I was. I lifted my face to the night sky and let soothing rain wash away the tears of frustration. I breathed deep the spicy smell of wet cedar and went back to try again.

That night as I drove home, words came bubbling up. Complete phrases forming a story. I rolled them around my tongue and spoke them aloud as I drove. They sounded good, but I was in the middle of writing a novel. I couldn't haul off and write something else. I ignored them.

The words wouldn't go away. The next day found me once again at the workshop and as I carved, new phrases floated to the surface of my mind. Once again I battened them down and became absorbed in the carving process.

That day Victor talked about his family, his son Solomon and how they carried on the traditions of Victor's people while living within white society. I realized that Solomon was the child in my story. Again I tucked the knowledge away.

It took several days to complete the mask. Each night as I drove home, new phrases bubbled up inside me. Finally my mask was finished. I felt good about it. It wasn't a work of art like Victor's masks, but it was a credible effort for an inexperienced white woman. I proudly hung it on the wall of our living room and went back to writing my novel.

Every time I started working, the words that appeared on my screen were phrases inspired by the workshop, not the words of the novel. I tried several times to concentrate on the novel plot and characters, but nothing would happen. Instead complete paragraphs were spilling forth about a child carving a mask from a log.

Finally I gave up, put the novel on hold, listened to my heart and wrote the first draft of *Solomon's Tree* in one afternoon.

I was afraid to share my story with Victor, Sharon and Solomon. What if I had misconstrued something? What if this process was one of the cultural things that shouldn't be shared except one on one, and with permission? Finally I plucked up enough courage to invite them for supper and read them the story.

There was a long silence when I had finished.

I sat in dread thinking I had blown our friendship by overstepping the mark.

Then Victor looked up and smiled. "I think my grandmother was sitting on your shoulder dictating," he said.

I rewrote the story several times, polished it up and sent it to Orca Book Publishers. It was accepted! Then began another round of work.

Victor had given me a gift by sharing an aspect of his culture with me. The publisher, Orca, the artist, Janet Wilson and I were then using his gift. In First Nations' tradition, this meant we should acknowledge the gift and return it -- give something back to Victor's culture. After discussion with Victor, we all contributed to a box full of books that was sent up north of Prince Rupert to Victor's village of Hartley Bay and donated to the school/community library.

When the final manuscript and art work were ready to go to the printers, Bob Tyrrell, the publisher at Orca, invited Victor's family, my husband and me to lunch. Victor's wife, Sharon, performed a smudge ceremony to send the book off. Janet Wilson could not attend as she was in Ontario, but she emailed a message that was read so she could be part of it. The smudge was a moving

and impressive ceremony to acknowledge our work as a team and to mark the completion of a project that had brought us all together.

We are all incredibly proud of *Solomon's Tree*.

### **A Few Words from the Illustrator**

After having successfully worked with Andrea Spalding on two other picture books, I was pleased to be asked to illustrate another manuscript. It is important to have faith in a story to be able to do it justice and I loved *Solomon's Tree* from the first time I read it. Although the subject matter was unfamiliar to me, I felt confident that I could illustrate this wonderful story with integrity. From past experience I also knew that Andrea would be a great help to me throughout the long process of turning words into pictures.

Firstly, Victor Reece agreed to design a mask for me to use in the paintings. It was important to us not to use our own interpretation of a Tsimpshian art form, but rather to have an expert master carver create the mask. Victor agreed and I flew out to Pender Island to watch his process. I spent a fascinating few days in Victor's cramped studio situated among the fragrant and towering cedar trees. While he split the wood, hacked off the bark, hollowed out the back and began carving, I saw the mask come to life just as Solomon did in the story. I photographed each stage and sketched Victor in charcoal while he carved. It is at times like that I think I must have the best job in the world.

I tried not to have preconceived ideas about who I would choose to represent the characters in the story, but when I met Victor and Sharon and Solomon it was clear to me that they would be perfect models. Thankfully they agreed and were most accommodating in my requests. Especially Solomon, although we had a bit of a struggle coaxing him into a tree. Back home in Eden Mills, I used our own resident Coast Salish master carver Harold Rice to play the father. When the mask was finished many months later, I returned to Pender to take a second round of photographs. By that time I had completed a set of rough compositions and fashioned a dummy book for Andrea's approval. She and her husband Dave were most helpful in driving me around the area to get a better sense of the landscape.

Once all the reference was compiled, I drew charcoal sketches of each scene. After they were approved I proceeded to the final oils which took many months of painting and repainting. Once again I commissioned Victor to



design some motifs to enhance the design of the book. Later on, I transferred these patterns to wood veneer and painted them in the same manner I had used on the spots. I was inspired by the traditional West Coast colors and limited my palette to red, black, blue and white.

*Solomon's Tree* is a fine example of artists working together in harmony to the best of their ability.

### A Few Words from the Artist

My traditional name is “Whe La Huh,” (Big Sky) of the Wolf Clan. My Grandmother Esther Reece inspired most of what I do today as an artist. In the long cold winter nights in Hartley Bay she would gather the children in my family around her and by a warm fire she told all the rich and magical stories carried through centuries of life on the Northwest Coast. I am proud of my heritage and proud of my people and of my children Solomon, Simon, Skeena, Honey and Sweetgrass.

Living and working on Pender has many wonderful opportunities and many challenges as a First Nations family and artist. One of the blessings has been meeting many gifted artists who are committed to their craft and to share their knowledge. This is the way my Grandmother taught me.

Andrea Spalding and Janet Wilson are two artists and human beings I respect and have enjoyed working with. Enjoyed is an understatement; they are very precious gifts on my path. I believe in the power of art to heal and *Solomon's Tree* serves as an important milestone in my family's history. It is the notion that an artist can come together and share technology and methods but it is even more than that, it is sharing love and light. It is sharing love and light with future generations so they can see how to bring different communities together to produce a shared memory that will live on forever.

I speak only for myself as a First Nations person and artist. The images and art shared in the book are only my interpretation of the vast and charismatic culture of the Tsimshian Nation. The truth is in the eye of the beholder.

Dim al quek nee jin  
Until I see you again,  
Victor Reece