OBITUARY

Ojibway author Richard Wagamese found salvation in stories

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Richard Wagamese, of the Ojibway First Nation, had a childhood fraught with troubles, but it did not deter him from eventually becoming a lauded author, broadcaster and journalist.

Richard Wagamese understood the power of words. He made a living from writing – eventually, after terrible struggles – but he also knew what words, put together the right way, could do for a life: They could save it. He knew this as a writer, and also as a reader. Whether his words were on the page or spoken aloud in mesmerizing performances, they were alive with raw honesty, searing insight and a delicate eloquence.

"He got to our cores; he got to where we are most human," says CBC broadcaster Shelagh Rogers, a friend whom Mr. Wagamese called his Chosen Sister. "And his words resonated with us. The fact that they were beautiful was gravy."

The self-taught Ojibway author's works were infused with his excruciating history. The tragedies that shaped him from early childhood gave birth to demons that chased him throughout his too-short life. But through books (and nature and music and animals and baseball and love), he found refuge.

"Stories are meant to heal," he wrote in his 2008 memoir One Native Life – one of 14 books he published in his lifetime, which included non-fiction, novels, poetry and children's books. "That's what my people say, and it's what I believe. Culling these stories has taken me a long way down the healing path from the trauma I carried."

Despite an intense shyness, Mr. Wagamese was a spellbinding speaker – leaving adults in tears or inspiring the toughest high school gym crowd. He told traditional stories, anecdotes from his life. He might do some stand-up or a Rocky impression.

"He briefly drummed to call in the ancestors and then he spoke for 45, 50 minutes without notes, with fluidity and eloquence and such grace," says Jane Davidson, recalling his appearance at her festival, the Sunshine Coast Festival of the Written Arts.

"He talked about how important it is to speak to each other, neighbour to neighbour."

Mr. Wagamese died March 10 at his home in Kamloops. He was 61. He died in his sleep of natural causes, according to his fiancée Yvette Lehmann. "In my opinion it was just heartbreak," she says. "From the life that he had to live, the past."

Richard Wagamese was born on Oct. 14, 1955, on the Wabaseemoong First Nation in northwestern Ontario. His first home was a canvas army tent hung from a spruce bough frame, he wrote in his essay The Path to Healing. His family fished, hunted and trapped. But his parents and extended family were deeply scarred by residential school.

"Each of the adults had suffered in an institution that tried to scrape the Indian out of their insides, and they came back to the bush raw, sore and aching," he wrote.

Mr. Wagamese inherited their trauma.

His childhood was dreadful. In that same story, he recounted having his left arm and shoulder smashed as a toddler. And how when he was almost three, the adults left him, his two brothers and sister alone in the bush on a bitterly cold winter day. They ran out of food and firewood. His older sister and brother hauled the two younger boys across a frozen bay and they huddled at the railroad depot. A police officer took them to the Children's Aid Society. "I would not see my mother or my extended family again for 21 years," he wrote.

He was fostered out and at the age of nine, adopted by a family he described as staunch white Presbyterians who led a regimented life and tolerated no disorder. "The wounds I suffered went far beyond the scars on my buttocks." He was moved to southern Ontario, separated from his native heritage.

He left home in St. Catharines at 16. For years, he lived on the street or in jail. Even when working, he was often homeless. He sometimes raided gardens and fruit trees. One winter, he spent a month living in a nativity scene. He became an alcoholic and a drug user.

But even in that darkness, there were life-changing events.

In St. Catharines, Mr. Wagamese, looking for shelter, followed people into a building. It was a library – and there he found a quiet, warm haven. And he found books. He would stack them into a mountainous L-shape surrounding him, worried he might be asked to leave.

Mr. Wagamese had a Grade 9 education but what he learned at the library was staggering. He carried a notebook and would jot down things he heard that sounded interesting. Then he would ask the librarians for books on those subjects: astronomy, geometry, music. At a bar one night, he heard people discussing James Joyce's Finnegan's Wake. The notoriously difficult book was his next library choice. Unlike many before him, he didn't give up. He bought his own copy. It took him months to finish it.

One day, a brown bag showed up on his desk. Mr. Wagamese didn't touch it for hours, afraid he might be accused of stealing what was inside. Finally, he

looked. There was a muffin and a sandwich – a gift from the librarian. She introduced him to the listening room. There he heard Beethoven for the first time. And she took him out, to a performance.

"He actually taped up his shoes with duct tape to look a little more put together," Ms. Lehmann says. "He was so afraid to go in there because he wasn't dressed properly. She said don't worry about that; just close your eyes and don't look at the people; just hear the music."

When Mr. Wagamese told that story at an event at the Victoria Native Friendship Society last year, many in the audience wept. "It hit people in the heart," executive director Bruce Parisian says.

At 23, he reunited with family and found his calling. After he told his long, terrible story, an elder gave him a storyteller's name: Mushkotay Beezheekee Anakwat – Buffalo Cloud. Your role is to be a teller of stories, the elder said.

In 1979, Mr. Wagamese was hitchhiking across Canada when a job posting on the board at the employment office in Regina caught his eye. A First Nations publication, New Breed, was looking for a native writer. He applied for the job, telling the editor that yes he had training but no transcripts; they had been destroyed in a fire. None of this was true.

He was told to return the following Monday, when he would be tested by rewriting newspaper stories. Mr. Wagamese went to the library, asked for books on journalism, and for five days buried himself in writing exercises. At the test he was presented with three Globe and Mail articles and told to shorten them. He got the job.

His dream of becoming a published author also received a boost at the library in Regina. In 1984, he took a book he had been writing to the writer-in-residence, Lorna Crozier.

"I took the novel home and was very moved by it and … I wrote him a page of encouragement," Ms. Crozier says.

They made an appointment to meet again, but he didn't show up. She eventually received a letter from him: He was in jail and needed books. Ms. Crozier and her husband Patrick Lane, living on her meagre salary, raided their own collection and mailed him some books. He never forgot it.

"You told me to keep on going; I needed someone to say that to me in my life," she recalls him saying.

Mr. Wagamese, who was also a broadcaster, left active journalism in 1993. (He continued to write as a freelancer, for publications including The Globe and Mail.) He published his first book, Keeper'n Me in 1994.

"We thought this is an extremely powerful voice and one that at that time wasn't really being heard," says John Pearce, who received his manuscript at Doubleday and became his editor and publisher – and later, his agent. His writing demonstrated "a storytelling ability that just grabbed you from the first page."

Keeper'n Me won the Writers' Guild of Alberta's Best Novel Award and launched his publishing career.

His breakthrough was Indian Horse, a novel about a hockey phenomenon who suffered from the legacy of the residential schools. It was a national bestseller, a Canada Reads 2013 contender and won the Burt Award for First Nations, Métis and Inuit Literature. It's being made into a film.

Another novel was published in 2014 to more raves. "Medicine Walk really knocked me out; it was a lovely book. And I'm a real snob about writing," says Thomas King, the award-winning author of The Inconvenient Indian. "Richard was the real deal."

Medicine Walk was dedicated to his two sons.

Mr. Wagamese's personal life was troubled. He did not raise his sons, Jason and Joshua. For Joshua: An Ojibway Father Teaches His Son was published in 2002, a love letter to his estranged son.

Mr. Wagamese married and divorced three times. But he found love again: Ms. Lehmann, a yoga teacher, contacted Mr. Wagamese about a writing workshop. When they finally met, over coffee in July, 2013, they talked for hours – about everything but writing. They moved in together that October. They moved twice since – each time to make room for Mr. Wagamese's ever-expanding music collection, she says. Last July, he proposed in Horseshoe Bay, where Ms. Lehmann was fresh off the ferry.

"It was a beautiful promise: to honour me, to be by my side, to be the best man that he can be for the rest of our lives. He always said to me that I can promise to love you until the end of my days."

Mr. Wagamese had many important mentors in his life and he became a mentor himself.

When Ms. Davidson brought him back to the Sunshine Coast for a schools-based aboriginal storytelling festival, his impact was stunning, according to Kerry Mahlman, district principal, aboriginal education.

Students said: "I didn't expect this, but that man just changed the way I think about everything," she recalls. "For a 16-year-old that struggles to pull his face away from his phone screen, to walk out with this look on their face … was just one of the most wonderful gifts."

After Waubgeshig Rice published his first book, Midnight Sweatlodge, he was shocked and delighted to receive a message from Mr. Wagamese. Mr. Wagamese had read his book and said he was happy to see a young Anishinaabe author writing fiction, adding that Mr. Rice should drop him a line if he needed any help.

For Mr. Rice, who is also a CBC journalist, this was "totally mind-blowing," he says. "He was a storyteller that I'd looked up to since I was a teenager. … I would definitely not have become an author or a journalist without his influence."

In 1991, Mr. Wagamese became the first Indigenous writer to win a National Newspaper Award, for his Calgary Herald columns. It's one of two awards that hung over his desk in his book-piled home office in view of where he wrote. The other is the Kouhi Award for outstanding contributions to the literature of Northwestern Ontario.

He received many other honours, including the 2013 Molson Prize from the Canada Council for the Arts, honorary degrees, and the 2015 Writers' Trust Matt Cohen Award – In Celebration of a Writing Life.

In his acceptance speech, he described the early mornings when he would prepare to write, "and hope that the stories that live inside the curl of your knuckles can be coaxed outward one more time," he said. "And you sit there

and you breathe and you hope and you dream and you close your eyes and you feel the essence of that gift radiating inside you."

His last book, Embers: One Ojibway's Meditations, came out of Mr. Wagamese's daily Facebook posts. They had a devoted following and Douglas and McIntyre head Howard White proposed publishing them as a collection. On March 7, Embers was nominated for a BC Book Award. Two nights later, Mr. Wagamese went to sleep and didn't wake up.

He had two more books in the works: Starlight, a nearly finished sequel to Medicine Walk; and One Drum: Stories and Ceremonies for a Planet, a journey into the spiritual teachings of Indigenous people. Says Mr. White: "He was bursting out in all directions."

In one of Mr. Wagamese's final Facebook meditations, posted in November, he wrote about starting his day with candlelight, tea and meditation, and what the years had taught him. "Actions born of contemplation are wiser than those made in quiet desperation. If all that's true, and I feel it is, then I have grown some in these 61 years. I have learned and become a better person. And from that maybe it's the years ahead that will be the richest of my life. A quiet man moving forward, gladly beyond all expectation."

A celebration of Mr. Wagamese's life will be held Saturday in Kamloops.

https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/ojibway-author-richard-wagamese-found-salvation-in-stories/article34422836/