



# SHE HOLDS UP THE STARS

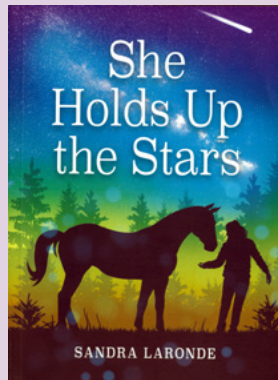
TEACHER'S GUIDE

Red Sky

TSO

Toronto  
Symphony  
Orchestra

# WELCOME



This Teacher's Guide was created by the Toronto Symphony Orchestra for the April 2026 premiere of Red Sky Performance's stage adaptation of Sandra Laronde's ***She Holds Up the Stars***. It is intended to be a supplementary resource for teachers studying the novel in their classroom.

For your convenience, this guide will give you an overview of the book's plot, characters, settings, and literary devices. However, it is not meant to replace reading the original text. Teachers and students should read the book to help themselves be prepared.

## HOW TO ORDER COPIES OF THE BOOK

If your library does not already have copies of ***She Holds Up the Stars*** for your students, you can purchase books at a 20% discount by using promo code **SHUTSTSO20** when ordering books through the [Annick Press](https://www.annickpress.com/) website. This offer is valid for a limited time only.

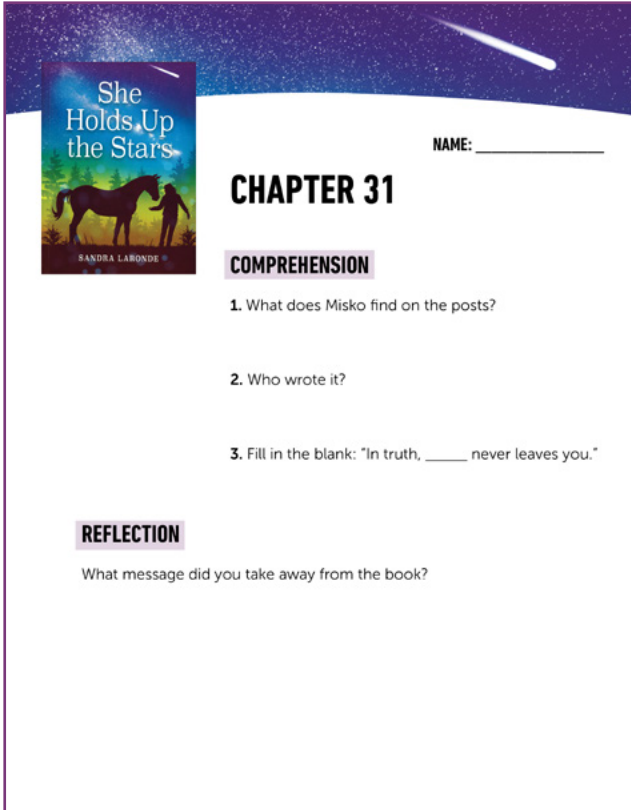
## HOW TO USE THIS TEACHER'S GUIDE

This Teacher's Guide should be used in tandem with the accompanying Student Workbook.

Within the Student Workbook, there are comprehension questions for each chapter. These questions are intentionally designed to be easy for those who have read the chapter, but difficult to guess for those who haven't. You can use these questions to assess if students have read and understood the chapter.

The workbook also includes an open-ended reflection question for each chapter. These can be used for group discussions in younger classrooms, or as individual written reflections for older students. The reflection questions are meant to get students thinking about the broader ideas in the book.

Let's get started!



**She Holds Up the Stars**  
SANDRA LARONDE

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

### CHAPTER 31

**COMPREHENSION**

1. What does Misko find on the posts?
2. Who wrote it?
3. Fill in the blank: "In truth, \_\_\_\_\_ never leaves you."

**REFLECTION**

What message did you take away from the book?

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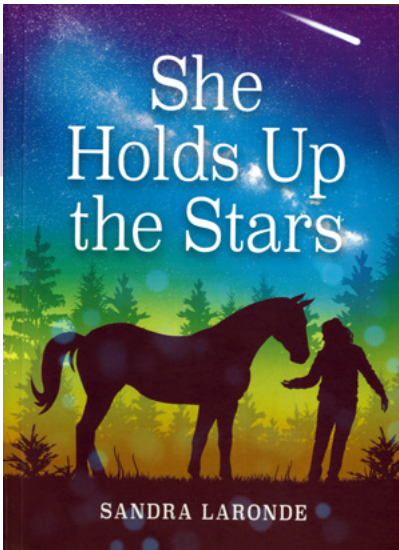
**105** ABOUT THE CONCERT

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# ABOUT THE BOOK



# ABOUT THE BOOK



## THE STORY

**“A young Indigenous girl searching for a sense of home finds strength and courage in her gifts, her deepening connection to the land, and her own cultural awakening in this moving coming-of-age story.**

The last thing that twelve-year old Misko wants to do is to move away from the city to spend time on the rez with her grandmother. And yet she feels strangely compelled to go, drawn by a pull that she feels in her dreams. Maybe she can finally find out what happened to her mother, who mysteriously disappeared when Misko was four years old.

Misko’s relationship to the rez shifts when she encounters a spirited horse named Mishtadim. But Mishtadim is being violently broken by the rancher next door and his son Thomas. Misko and Thomas clash at first, only to find themselves drawn together by the wild horse. As Misko slowly discovers her unique bond with Mishtadim, she feels a sense of belonging and comes to understand the beauty of the world all around her.

***She Holds Up the Stars*** is a powerful story of reconciliation and the interwoven threads that tie us to family, to the land, and to our own sense of self.”

## THE AUTHOR

Sandra Laronde is a highly accomplished arts innovator, multidisciplinary artist, and leader.

Sandra Laronde is from the Temagami Anishinaabe (People of the Deep Water) and grew up in Temagami, Ontario. After graduation from the University of Toronto (Honours Bachelor of Arts), she founded Red Sky Performance in 2000, named after her Anishinaabemowin name, Misko Kizhigoo Migizii Kwe, meaning Red Sky Eagle Woman.



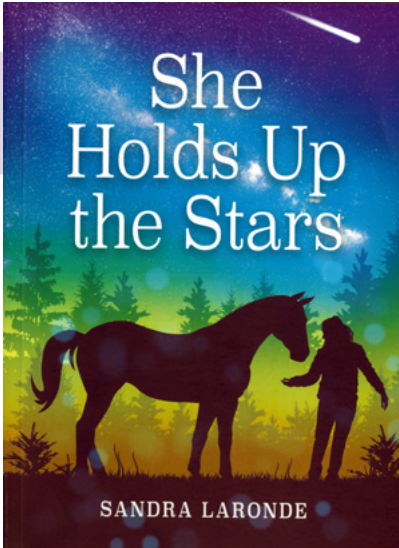
An accomplished arts innovator, multi-disciplinary artist, and visionary leader, Laronde plays a pivotal role in the ongoing Indigenous cultural resurgence of Canada. The award-winning novel, *She Holds Up the Stars*, is her debut novel.

Acclaimed for her bold and inspiring multidisciplinary practice in dance, theatre, live music and media, Laronde has built an extraordinary body of work with brilliant collaborators over the past 25 years. Under her leadership, Red Sky Performance has toured to 24 countries across four continents.

Her inexhaustible energy extends to cultural diplomacy, forging stronger ties by representing Canada on prestigious global stages and at influential international events such as the Venice Biennale, Canadian Heritage's inaugural Creative Industries Trade Mission to China, a Trade Mission to Europe, among others.

Sandra Laronde's many awards and honours include the Governor General's Performing Arts Award, the Governor General of Canada's Meritorious Service Cross, the Order of Ontario, the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario Heritage Award for Excellence in Conservation, the Canada Council for the Arts Victor Martyn Lynch-Staunton Award for Outstanding Artist in Dance, the Indspire Award for the Arts, the Toronto Arts Foundation's Indigenous Artist Award, the Johanna Metcalf Performing Arts Prize, and an honorary doctorate from Trent University, among other recognitions

# ABOUT THE BOOK



## CONTENT ADVISORY

***She Holds Up the Stars*** is primarily a joyful coming-of-age story about a courageous Indigenous girl who must navigate a world of both beauty and cruelty. This story introduces children and youth to truth and reconciliation in a relatable way, deepening their understanding and encouraging positive perspectives and attitudes.

In some parts of the story, there are age-appropriate but direct references to the abuse of Indigenous children at residential schools. As a teacher, you should exercise discretion by assessing whether your own students are prepared for this, and making sure you allow enough time to discuss and fully explain this serious topic. For a list of recommended educational resources, please consult the [National Centre for Truth & Reconciliation](#).

Furthermore, the book also contains indirect references to some of the other historical abuses that Indigenous Peoples have endured in Canada, such as systemic racism, the Sixties Scoop, or Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Additionally, there are a few implied references to alcoholism and domestic abuse. These references are hidden in the subtext and will probably go unnoticed by young readers, but you should still assess whether your students are prepared to encounter this subject matter.

# CHAPTER SUMMARIES

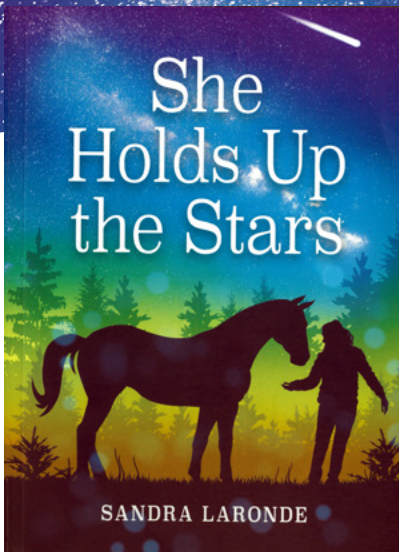


# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

Misko, a 12-year-old Indigenous girl, arrives at her Kokum's house. ("Kokum," the Cree word for grandmother, is also used by the Anishinaabe, who often say Kokum or Gokum interchangeably.) It is the last place she wants to be—she would much rather be in Winnipeg. Still haunted by a months-old slap, Misko reluctantly leaves her life with Auntie Madeleine in the city to spend the summer on the reserve with her grandmother.

At first resistant, Misko gradually finds comfort in Kokum's company and even learns how she earned the nickname "Chickadee." When Misko discovers a photo of her mother—also 12, smiling beside a pony—it becomes a poignant reminder of the mother who vanished eight years earlier under mysterious circumstances.



# CHAPTER 1

## COMPREHENSION

1. Where does Misko arrive?

*Misko arrives at Kokum's house on the rez.*

2. How is Kokum related to Misko?

*Kokum is Misko's grandmother*

3. Who is the girl with the pony in the photo that Misko sees?

*Misko's mother*

## REFLECTION

Why do you think that moving away from the city is “the last thing Misko wanted”?

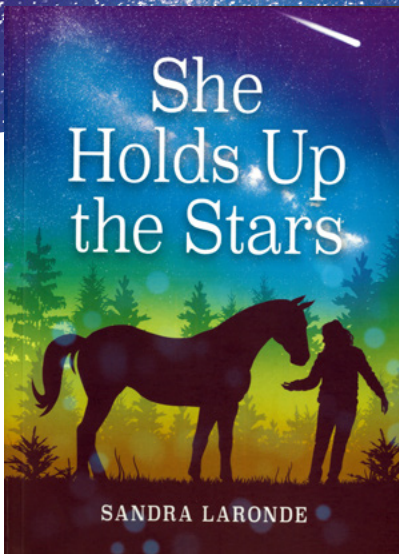
*Answers will vary*

# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

It is day two on the rez, and Misko is adjusting to her surroundings. She braids her hair while whispering a prayer, and makes tea for her grandmother. Misko starts to learn bits and pieces about her mother, but is frustrated that no one ever tells her much. Misko reflects on what she knows. She is aware of the issue of Missing (and Murdered) Indigenous Women and Girls, and she recalls being told “never go on that highway west in B.C.” (i.e. Highway of Tears).

Misko remembers a terrifying incident where a stranger tried to abduct her, and slapped her to stop her from screaming for help. It was following this incident that Auntie Madeleine imposed strict rules, including a ban on going out after dark and sending Misko to the reserve for the summer. Despite understanding Auntie Madeleine’s concern, Misko remains reluctant to be on the rez.



## CHAPTER 2

### COMPREHENSION

1. Who does Misko want to learn more about?

*Her mother*

2. Who told Misko she wasn't allowed to go out after dark?

*Auntie Madeleine*

3. What happened between Misko and the stranger?

*The stranger tried to abduct Misko and slapped her when she called for help.*

### REFLECTION

Why do you think that adults only tell Misko bits and pieces about her mother?

*Answers will vary*

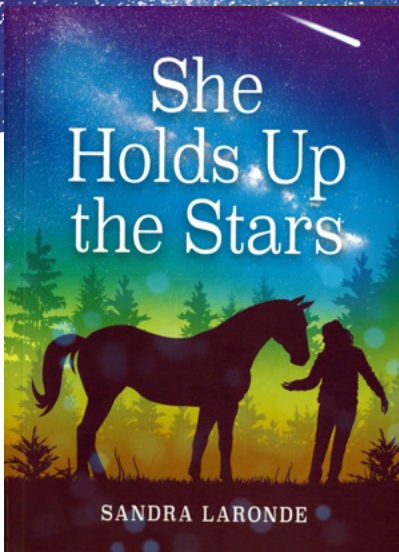
# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

Misko explores the house while Kokum is gardening. In a closet, she discovers a shoebox of newspaper clippings showing photos taken in residential schools, where many of her relatives and more than 150,000 Indigenous children were sent.

We learn that Kokum never went to residential school—she wasn't home when they came to take her, and they never came back for her because she's the oldest and "older kids are harder to break". Tragically, when Kokum had a child of her own, her eldest daughter Anna (Misko's mother) was forced to go to residential school and it broke Kokum's heart. As a result, Kokum protected her second daughter (Auntie Madeleine) by not registering the birth.

Alongside the photos, Misko finds baby booties, a heart-shaped rock, and a silver ring with a turquoise stone. She puts the shoebox away and picks her room. Looking out, Misko sees a beautiful horse, and feels an otherworldly connection. She hears "mish-ta" float into her awareness, and wonders what it means.



## CHAPTER 3

### COMPREHENSION

1. What do the photos on the newspaper clippings show?

*Indigenous children who were sent to residential schools*

2. How did Kokum prevent her second daughter from going to residential school?

*By not registering the birth*

3. What does Misko see when looking outside her window?

*A horse*

### REFLECTION

What do you think Misko felt when she saw the horse? Have you ever had a similar experience?

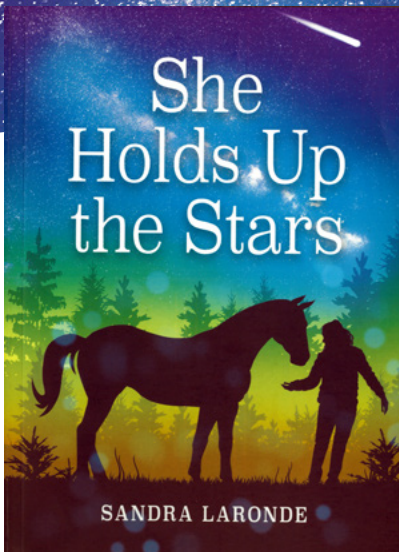
*Answers will vary*

# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

The wonder of the moment is shattered when Misko sees a rancher whipping the horse. She scrambles out the window and rushes to the fence. The rancher is gone by the time she arrives, but she encounters his son. Misko confronts him about whipping, sparking a debate about proper horse training methods. Misko is angry that the horse is being hurt, but she also expresses pent-up anger about people “breaking promises”. The boy defends his father’s horse breaking methods. Misko runs away in frustration.

Through her internal monologue, we learn that back at school in the city Misko faces bullying for being Indigenous, and that one of the few things that brings her happiness is running.



## CHAPTER 4

### COMPREHENSION

1. What is happening to the horse?

*The horse is being whipped.*

2. Why does Misko run to the neighbour's fence?

*To stop the horse from being hurt*

3. What does Misko do after feeling frustrated?

*Misko runs away.*

### REFLECTION

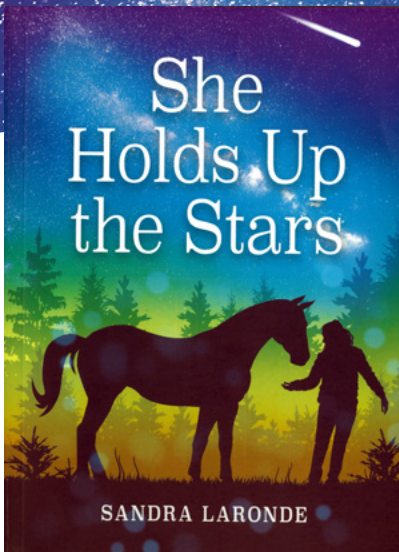
What approach do you think Misko would take to train the horse?

*Answers will vary*

# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

Misko stops running and collapses from exhaustion. Lying down, she feels embraced by the land. The horse she saw earlier approaches her. She names him "Mishtadim," and he responds positively. However, the magical moment ends abruptly when Mishtadim is startled by three grouse flying out of the bush, causing him to run away despite Misko's attempts to calm him.



## CHAPTER 5

### COMPREHENSION

1. Who embraces and cradles Misko?

*The land*

2. What is the name of the horse?

*Mishtadim*

3. Why does the horse run away?

*He is startled by birds (3 grouse).*

### REFLECTION

“Misko looked at her hand, marvelling that she had touched this creature. No. That wasn’t quite right. He had *accepted* her touch.” (p. 25)

Why do you think Misko makes this distinction?

*Answers will vary*

# SUMMARY

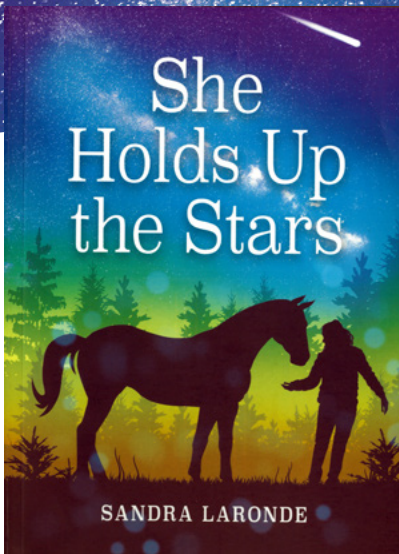
## In This Chapter...

Misko returns to the fence the next morning, hoping to see the horse, or to tell the boy she can train Mishtadim, but they're not there.

She walks to Cross Lake and finds a group of Indigenous children: Nelson, Nimkii, Sage, Kiiwedin, Sadie, Kiera, and Zach, all of whom she met six years ago. They're sitting in lawn chairs around an overturned tub, having fun pretending to play the big drum like at a powwow. Nimkii sings a special song that came to his grandfather in a dream. During the song, Misko is overcome by emotion. She feels a mysterious connection.

The other kids check to make sure she's OK, but they aren't surprised by her reaction, saying, "It's your ancestors that you feel. You realize that they were always there."

Nelson offers Misko a ride back home on his ATV. He asks how long she'll stay on the rez, and she declares that she's only here for the summer, and is planning to return to Winnipeg for school in the fall.



## CHAPTER 6

### COMPREHENSION

1. Who does Misko meet by the lake?

*A group of Indigenous children (Nelson, Nimkii, Sage, Kiiwedin, Sadie, Kiera, and Zach)*

2. What is the group doing?

*Pretending to play the big drum like at a powwow.*

3. How long does Misko think she'll stay on the rez?

*Only for the summer.*

### REFLECTION

In your own words, how would you describe what Misko experienced during the powwow?

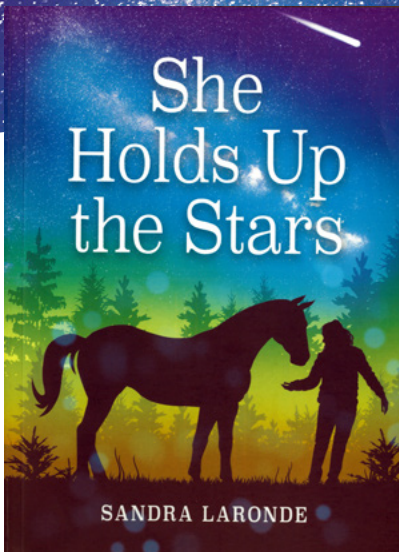
*Answers will vary*

# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

At night, Misko gazes at the stars, and marvels at how she can see the Milky Way because there isn't any light pollution here. She recalls what her Kokum taught her about the Milky Way, or the "Jibaykana", which is a spiritual pathway—a river of souls making their way home. Falling asleep, she dreams in Anishinaabemowin, the Ojibway language.

In her dream, she's at the shoreline of a "big body of water", and Noodin, a relative she has never met before, invites her into a large birchbark canoe. This place feels deeply familiar to her. As the canoe reaches its destination, Misko is welcomed by a woman who loves her dearly and has been waiting for her. The woman's jewellery and the scar on her wrist implies she is Misko's mother.



## CHAPTER 7

### COMPREHENSION

1. Being away from the light of the city, what is Misko able to see?

*The stars*

2. What is the name of “the river of souls journeying home”?

*Jibaykana [Milky Way]*

3. How does Misko travel in her dream?

*A large birchbark canoe*

### REFLECTION

Who do you think the woman in Misko’s dream is? What evidence supports your idea?

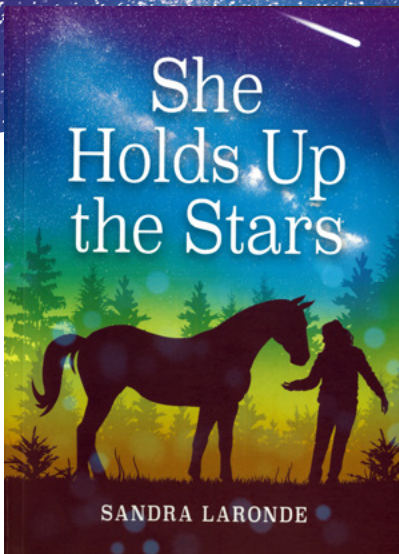
*Answers will vary*

# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

Next morning, while gardening with Kokum, Misko offers to pull out the weeds, but Kokum explains that those “weeds” are medicine and that every plant has a purpose. Plants are not just objects, but fellow living beings—they are a “who” not a “what”.

Later that night, Misko steps outside to see the stars, and feels “a kind of pull that never gets talked about in school. An ancestral pull.” Returning inside, she notices a shadow emerging from the bushes, and alarmingly it is heading towards the house’s unlocked door! Misko rushes to face the intruder.



## CHAPTER 8

### COMPREHENSION

1. What does Misko offer to pull out?

*Weeds*

2. Kokum teaches Misko that, "Every \_\_\_\_ has a gift."

*Plant*

3. Kokum teaches Misko about the personhood of all living beings. Instead of referring to trees as a "what", she should refer to them as a "\_\_\_\_"

*Who*

### REFLECTION

How would your relationship with fruits and vegetables change if you thought of them as gifts from plants?

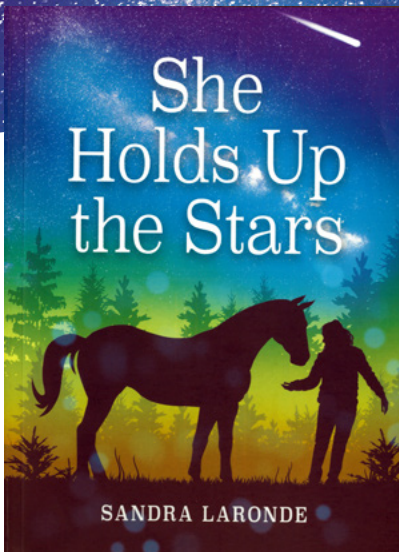
*Answers will vary*

# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

The “intruder” is actually Shoshana, a 10-year-old fair-skinned girl with green eyes whom Kokum adopted after the girl’s grandmother passed away. Shoshana regularly visits to do “night-sitting” because Kokum sometimes has bad dreams.

Shoshana makes herself at home, and Misko feels threatened by this familiarity. Misko feels especially envious of Shoshana, because she’s pretty, smart, “so white”, and not only has both parents alive but also has a relationship with Misko’s grandmother, Kokum. Seeing their different skin tones reminds Misko of the bullying she endured at school for being Indigenous, bringing back feelings of shame and self-loathing.



## CHAPTER 9

### COMPREHENSION

1. Who is the “intruder”?

*Shoshana*

2. Why did she come to Kokum’s house?

*To “night-sit” Kokum*

3. Why is Misko envious of her?

*Misko is envious because Shoshana is more privileged and grew up knowing her parents.*

### REFLECTION

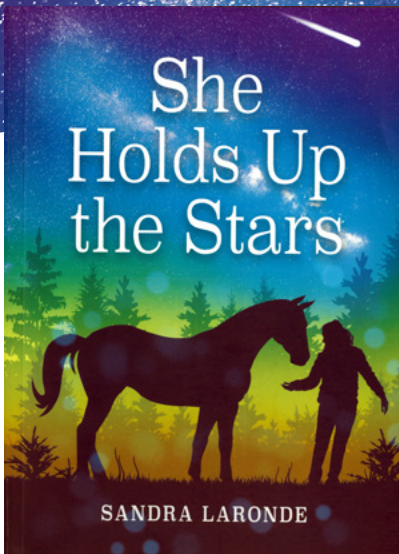
Why do you think Misko feels shame about her identity?

*Answers will vary*

# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

In the morning, Misko prepares tea for Kokum, and tells her about Shoshana. Kokum explains that Shoshana is considered part of the family, and draws interconnected circles to illustrate what it means to be a family. Misko compares this drawing to a family bracelet, then she remembers the bracelet from her dream, the one with the missing gem. She asks Kokum if her mom wore bracelets, but gets no answer.



## CHAPTER 10

### COMPREHENSION

1. Who does Kokum say is a part of the family?

*Shoshana*

2. What does Kokum draw to show Misko what “family” means?

*Interconnected circles*

3. What was missing from the bracelet in Misko’s dream?

*A gem*

### REFLECTION

When talking about what love and family means, Kokum explains, “Everything’s round”. What do you think this means?

*Answers will vary*

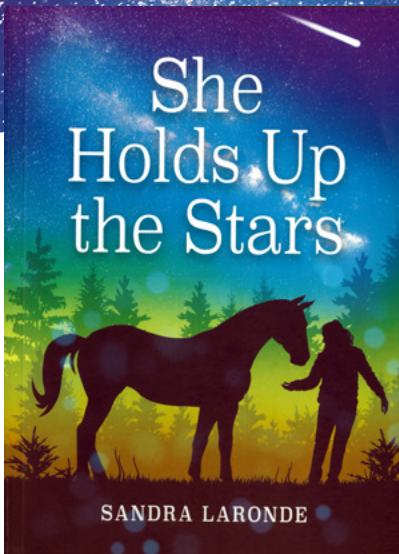
# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

Misko meets the blond boy again and shares how she was able to befriend the horse, but he dismisses it, focusing on his responsibility to “break” the horse. Misko is frustrated, but wants to learn more about Mishtadim.

The boy says that the horse is actually named Brutus, because of the animal’s bad temperament. He insists that he knows how to “raise and break” horses because his family has been doing it for generations. Misko shifts the conversation to learn more about the boy, whose name is Thomas. She considers they might get along.

Misko and Thomas discuss Mishtadim’s fate if he doesn’t get properly trained: he might be sold or put down. They debate training methods. Misko suggests maybe Mishtadim misses his mother rather than needing to be “broken”. She draws a parallel to Indigenous children being forcibly taken from their homes and “broken” in residential schools, explaining this to Thomas, who doesn’t know much about it. Misko becomes increasingly livid as she describes the horrible abuses her family endured in residential schools. This almost becomes a fight once Misko criticizes Thomas’ privileged family, causing him to get defensive and storm off in frustration.



## CHAPTER 11

### COMPREHENSION

1. What name did the rancher give to the horse?

*Brutus*

2. What is the name of the rancher's boy?

*Thomas*

3. What will happen if Mishtadim isn't properly trained?

*He'll be sold or put down*

### REFLECTION

What are the similarities between Mishtadim's life and those of Indigenous children forced to go to residential schools?

*Answers will vary*

# SUMMARY

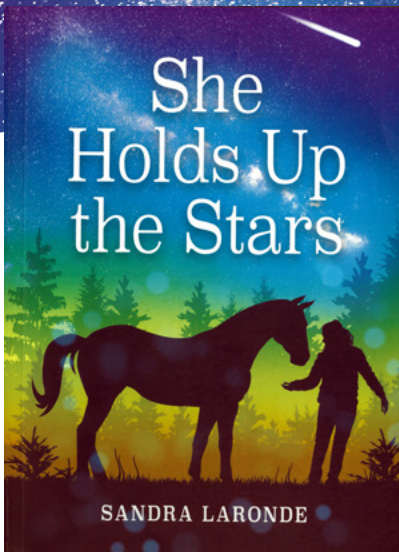
## In This Chapter...

Misko feels guilty for upsetting Thomas, despite not liking him. In the meantime, she visits the grocery store run by Mr. Turner. There, she learns more about her mother, Anna, who once had a hackney pony that used to live at the store. Mr. Turner doesn't keep a horse anymore, but he misses having one around. (This foreshadows the end of the story.)

Returning to Kokum's house, Misko finds her watching baseball. Kokum is a passionate sportsfan. We learn that Misko's grandfather was a star athlete, and that his name was Noodin, just like the man who appeared in Misko's dream. Misko asks what happened to her grandfather, but gets no answer.

Later that night, restless, Misko leaves her bed and sneaks outside. She dances in the moonlight, feeling actual comfort in her own skin. Spotting Mishtadim nearby, she senses a connection with him. Suddenly, he reacts to mosquitoes and flees, prompting her to do the same.

Returning home, Misko finds Shoshana behind a large rain barrel, visibly upset, and crying.



## CHAPTER 12

### COMPREHENSION

1. Whose store does Misko visit?

*Mr. Turner's grocery store*

2. What does Misko learn about her mother?

*Her mother had a pony and he lived at the store.*

3. What is Noodin's relationship to Misko?

*Noodin is Misko's grandfather.*

### REFLECTION

What do you think will happen to Mishtadim by the end of the story?

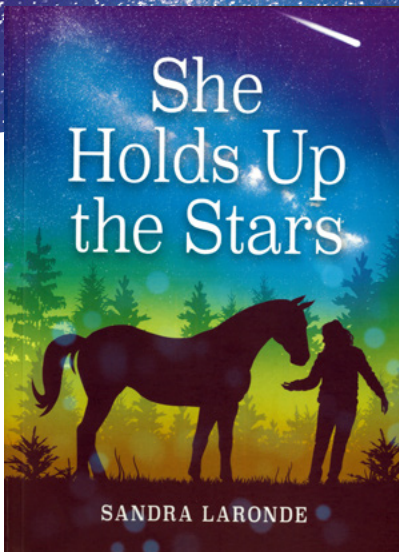
*Answers will vary*

# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

Misko brings Shoshana inside, and learns that she came over because she was scared to be alone at her house. Misko empathises and tells Shoshana she is part of her family and is welcome anytime. Shoshana quickly falls asleep after being tucked into the sofa bed. Misko wonders if Shoshana has the same kind of dreams that she does.

That night, Misko dreams of a beautiful woman resembling her mother, singing on horseback. Misko doesn't know what the dream means, but she feels refreshed by it.



## CHAPTER 13

### COMPREHENSION

1. What is Shoshana scared of?

*Being alone at night*

2. How does Misko help Shoshana?

*Misko invites her to stay over any time and tucks her into bed.*

3. What does Misko wonder about Shoshana?

*Misko wonders if Shoshana has similar dreams to her.*

### REFLECTION

What do you think Misko's dreams mean?

*Answers will vary*

# SUMMARY

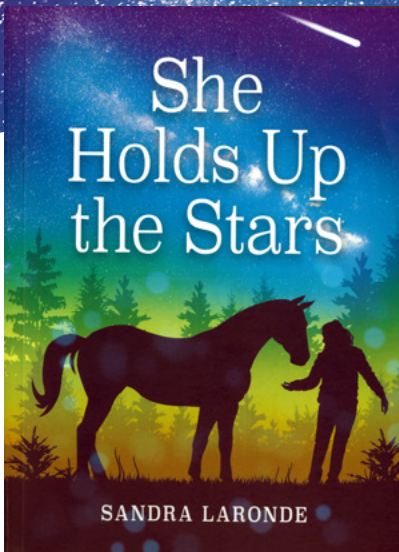
## In This Chapter...

Shoshana is gone by the time Misko gets up, but she helped Kokum before leaving. Misko no longer feels jealous, realizing that everyone has a place in the family.

Outside, Misko skips along the fence, but stops when she finds names of residential school children carved into the posts. She wonders who carved them. Next, Misko comes across a barn and finds Thomas inside. In simpler words, they argue about two opposing philosophical perspectives: Is nature a commodity that belongs to humans because we are “superior” to all other lifeforms, or is nature a community that we belong to, because all life is equally important and we in fact depend on nature to sustain us?

Thomas explains that his father is away selling two horses, and he’s been left to train Brutus alone. Misko asks if she can help with Mishtadim. Thomas agrees. Upon entering the barn, Misko notices that one of the mares has “no light in her eyes”. Thomas explains that the mare is “shut-down”, meaning she doesn’t respond to the whip or spurs anymore, and so will probably be sold. Sadly, the mare doesn’t even respond to the carrots Misko tries to give her.

Seeing Mishtadim, the excited but inexperienced Misko opens his stallgate loudly and rushes in. This startles the horse, and he kicks her in the chest out of fear. She is knocked backward. Thomas urgently tugs her away to safety before the horse can deal a lethal second blow.



## CHAPTER 14

### COMPREHENSION

1. What does Misko find carved in the fence posts?

*The names of children who were sent to residential school*

2. Where is Thomas' father?

*Away selling two of the horses*

3. What does Mishtadim do to Misko?

*He kicks her in the chest after being startled.*

### REFLECTION

Do you agree that we're "smarter and better than all of the other animals put together," or is all life equally important because animals and plants, "could live without us, but we can't live without them"?

*Answers will vary*

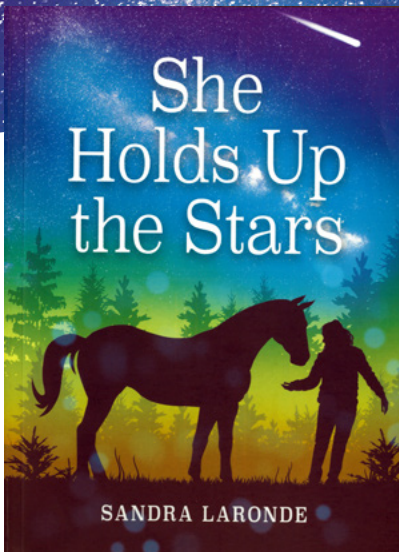
# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

Misko can't breathe without it hurting. Thomas advises her never to walk up behind a horse, especially not "that one". She has a bruise the size of a baseball in her armpit. Thomas brings her inside the kitchen, administers first aid, and tries to distract her from the pain with anecdotes from more serious horse kick encounters. They bond by comparing scars. Misko mentions her mother's scars from the teacher putting her hands on a hot radiator in residential school. Misko tells Thomas more about the dehumanizing abuses inflicted upon children in residential schools.

Misko asks about Thomas' mother, but he doesn't answer. Thomas offers Misko a soda drink, and pours it "like a pro" because his father taught him how to do so with beer. We learn that his dad often gets drunk and becomes mean, and that's why Thomas' mother stays away with his little brother Billy. Despite the abuse, Thomas is empathetic, and explains that his father is mean because he's had a hard life, but that his heart's in the right place.

Misko returns to reassure Mishtadim that it wasn't his fault for kicking her. She tells him, "We all get scared," echoing her comforting of Shoshana. They reconcile. Thomas invites Misko to visit Mistadim again tomorrow. Misko walks home in pain.



## CHAPTER 15

### COMPREHENSION

1. What do Misko and Thomas compare?

*Scars*

2. How did Misko's mother get scars on her wrists?

*A residential school teacher put her hands on a hot radiator as punishment whenever she spoke her own language.*

3. What does Misko do to Mishtadim after getting kicked?

*She returns to reassure Mishtadim that it wasn't his fault.*

### REFLECTION

Who is Misko talking about when she says, "We all get scared sometimes"?

*Answers will vary*

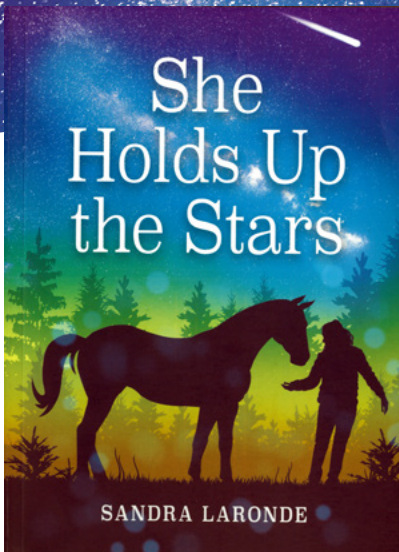
# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

When Misko gets home, Shoshana and Kokum are cooking supper together. Initially jealous, Misko learns that Shoshana came to make a special bannock recipe just for her. Misko tells them about life in the city, but doesn't reveal how someone had tried to abduct her.

At supper time, Misko grimaces when reaching for more delicious bannock, which alerts Kokum that she's hurt. She tells them she got kicked by "Brutus", but doesn't mention Thomas. Shoshana asks her if she saw Thomas, "the awfully cute boy whose dad's real mean so no one goes over there".

Looking at Misko's bruise, Kokum recalls how Misko's mother used to have bruises, when she would help the rancher Desjardins' boy with his horses. Kokum warns Misko not to go near the ranch, to avoid getting hurt like her mother. It is revealed that Misko's mother's horse was also called Mishtadim. Misko quivers, feeling a strong connection with her mother. Later that night, Misko invites Shoshana to share her room, and they bond over "girl talk", becoming close friends.



## CHAPTER 16

### COMPREHENSION

1. What special treat is Shoshana making for Misko?

*Bannock*

2. What was the name of Misko's mother's horse?

*Mishtadim*

3. What does "Mishtadim" mean?

*"Big dog" or literally "big elk"*

### REFLECTION

How has Misko changed since coming to live with Kokum? Does she still want the same things she did at the start?

*Answers will vary*

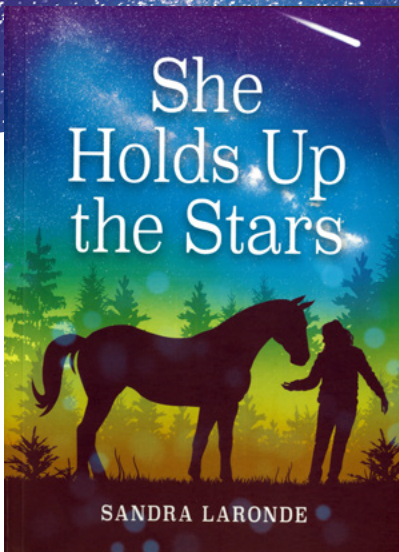
# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

During a big country rainstorm, Misko thumbs through horse-themed paperback books that might have belonged to her mother: *Black Beauty*, *National Velvet*, and *The Black Stallion*. Feeling restless, Misko asks Kokum many questions, including about the names carved in the wooden fence, but Kokum only answers the questions she wants to answer. Throughout the rainstorm, Misko feels a connection to nature.

The next morning, she sets out to find Mishtadim, hoping Thomas kept his promise to let the horse graze on the hill. Before she can locate them, Nelson arrives on his ATV and invites her to join the other kids. Misko goes along with them. They play an unconventional game of basketball using a hoop attached to a birch tree overhanging the water, where “dunking” means plunging yourself into the water.

Later that evening, they roast hot dogs by the fire. Misko bonds with her older cousin Autumn, who shares her aspirations of attending university and then afterwards returning home, a place she deeply cherishes. Misko sees herself reflected in Autumn, and feels a growing sense of belonging here too. Autumn tells Misko about the story of Sky Woman and where the Anishinaabe people came from. Towards the end of their conversation, Autumn bestows upon Misko the name “Odoobina’anangoog” meaning “She Holds Up the Stars”.



## CHAPTER 17

### COMPREHENSION

1. What is Autumn planning to do after going to university?

*Come back home*

2. In the Anishinaabe creation story, who brings life to Earth?

*Sky Woman*

3. What name does Autumn give to Misko?

*"She Holds Up the Stars"  
(Odoobina'anangoog)*

### REFLECTION

How does a person know where they belong? What makes a place feel like home to you?

*Answers will vary*

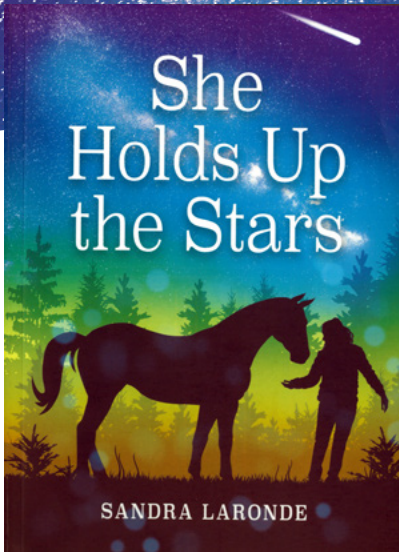
## CHAPTER

# 18

# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

The following day, Misko walks to the fence with carved names and places a bunch of wildflowers there. We learn that Kokum had explained that Misko's mother is the one who carved the names, in honour of those who went to residential school. Misko ponders if this fence could also serve as a memorial for her mother.



## CHAPTER 18

### COMPREHENSION

1. Who carved the names in the fence?

*Misko's mother, Anna*

### REFLECTION

Why do you think Kokum specifies that losing the "ability to trust" is so damaging?

*Answers will vary*

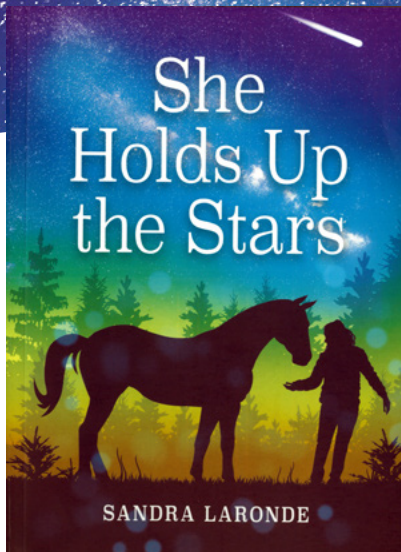
# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

Misko sees a horse trailer parked outside Mishtadim's barn, indicating that Thomas's Father, Mr. Desjardins, is back home. She hears Mr. Desjardins yelling at Thomas and accusing him of not completing his tasks. Misko sees Thomas get physically assaulted by his father, prompting her to cry out, which catches Mr. Desjardins' attention. Thomas quietly signals for her to run away.

Mr. Desjardins quickly grabs Misko's arm to restrain her, reminding her of the man who had slapped her before. Questioned by his father about who Misko is, Thomas pretends not to know her. Mr. Desjardins spews racist remarks at Misko, but then momentarily stops when he notices her resemblance to her mother, whom he knew as a child. However, he "fends off the memory like an irksome fly", and then makes unsettling comments about her appearance.

Things are interrupted when Thomas' mother and younger brother Billy arrive by car. Mr. Desjardins goes to embrace his younger son, but then roughhouses him to make him cry. Thomas tries to console his little brother, but his dad admonishes him because Billy "needs to toughen up after a month of living with his mom". Mr. Desjardins goes inside with Thomas' mother, whose withdrawn demeanour implies domestic abuse (although this is never explicitly stated). Now alone outside, Thomas comforts his brother Billy tenderly, and urges Misko to leave. Angered, Misko runs away.



## CHAPTER 19

### COMPREHENSION

1. Who hits Thomas?

*His father, Mr. Desjardins*

2. Whose arrival interrupts the conflict?

*Thomas' mother and little brother*

3. What does Misko do at the end of the chapter?

*She runs away.*

### REFLECTION

What do you think Mr. Desjardins is thinking about when he “recognizes someone in” Misko, but “fends off the memory like an irksome fly”?

*Answers will vary*

## CHAPTER 20

# SUMMARY

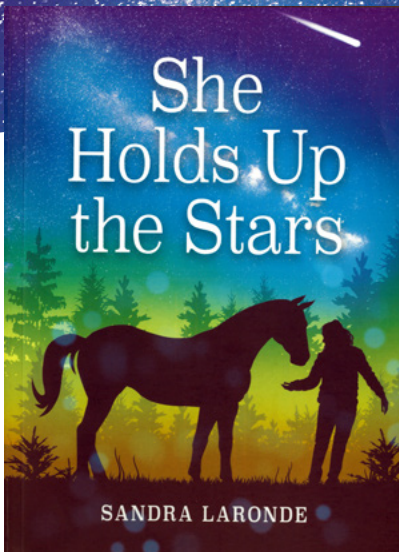
### In This Chapter...

Misko finds solace in nature's sounds. Thomas catches up with her, and apologizes for his father's behaviour. Misko is upset that he denied knowing her, but Thomas explains he was trying to protect her from his father's harsher comments. He admits he really does consider Misko to be his friend.

Curious about Mr. Desjardins' abusive behaviour, Misko asks Thomas for more details. He reveals that his father had his own history of childhood abuse, at the hands of Thomas' grandfather. Misko asks why Thomas' mother didn't step in, but he explains that "She can't do anything. She's scared of him. Shut-down. She's run away a few times but keeps coming back."

Thomas confides that he dislikes harming horses but feels forced to by his father's threats. He compares his father's actions to the damaging effects of residential schools on children. This angers Misko, given that domestic abuse and cultural genocide are not equivalent, however she holds back, noticing Thomas' vulnerability.

Misko points to the geese flying as a metaphor for younger generations taking leadership and embracing reconciliation. If they can train Mishtadim, that will prevent Mr. Desjardins from selling the horse. They devise a plan: next Wednesday, when his father is away at a rodeo, they will train Mishtadim together.



## CHAPTER 20

### COMPREHENSION

1. Why did Thomas deny knowing Misko?

*He was trying to protect her from his father.*

2. What does Misko use as a metaphor for change?

*The geese taking turns to fly at the front*

3. When will Misko and Thomas train Mishtadim?

*Next Wednesday when Thomas' father is off to a rodeo.*

### REFLECTION

Why do you think Misko gets angry when Thomas compares the residential school system to his *individual* story of abuse?

*Answers will vary*

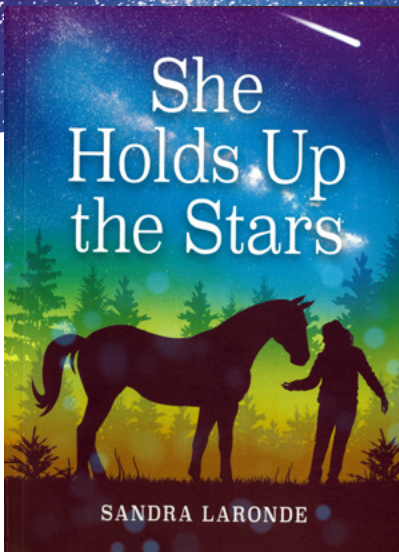
# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

Misko eagerly counts down the days until she can see Mishtadim. On Tuesday, she visits Mr. Turner to ask about her grandfather, Noodin.

Mr. Turner shares that he and Noodin used to work together on a frozen lake, and one day their pickup truck fell through the ice. Mr. Turner managed to escape, but Noodin succumbed to hypothermia before he could be rescued. Mr. Turner lost some fingers to frostbite, but, more significantly, he lost his closest friend. Despite knowing that Kokum does not blame him for her husband's death, Mr. Turner feels immense guilt and hasn't visited her since that tragic event.

Misko thanks him and returns home to confide in Kokum that she knows about Mishoomis (Mishoomis is the Cree word for 'grandfather'). Overwhelmed, Misko breaks down in tears. Kokum comforts her. Later that night, Misko has a nightmare about falling into icy darkness.



## CHAPTER 21

### COMPREHENSION

1. What happened to Misko's grandfather?

*His truck fell through the ice and he died of hypothermia.*

2. Why didn't Kokum tell Misko about her grandfather?

*She didn't want it to seem like she blamed Mr. Turner.*

3. Why hasn't Mr. Turner visited Kokum since then?

*He feels guilty about the death of his friend.*

### REFLECTION

What emotions do you think Misko feels after learning about her grandfather?

*Answers will vary*

# CHAPTER 22

# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

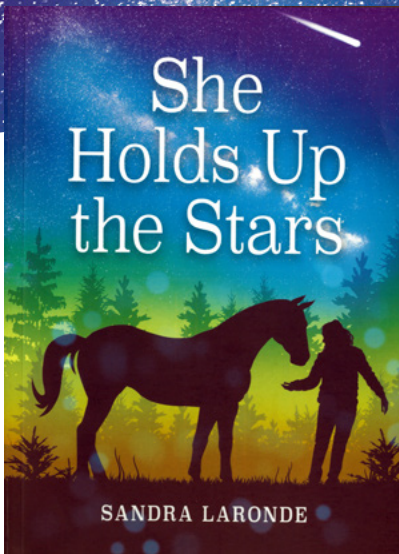
Misko's nightmare continues. She dreams of a male teacher slapping female students, then eating a bloody red apple which gets stuck in his throat, which looks like an Adam's apple and makes her think of the man who tried to abduct her. Hardly able to breathe, Misko wakes up thrashing in her sheets. She realizes it is Wednesday, and sneaks out to find Mishtadim.

Shoshana notices her and wants to follow. Initially reluctant, Misko knows how it feels to be rejected and lets Shoshana tag along. They make themselves lunch, and bring carrots for Mishtadim.

On their way, they encounter a puppy who had followed Misko back from Mr. Turner's store the other day. Shoshana explains that the dogs here are "owned" even though they run wild. Misko complains, "Why do people want to own everything?"

Misko feeds the dog and they decide to name him "Aniimoosh," meaning dog, much the same way that Mishtadim's name means horse.

Arriving at the barn where Thomas is, they notice he has a bruise on his cheek. Shoshana asks if his dad hit him, but Thomas remains silent. He explains that Mishtadim will be sold for dog food or glue if he can't be trained. Determined, Misko resolves to train the horse.



## CHAPTER 22

### COMPREHENSION

1. Who wants to join Misko in training Mishtadim?

*Shoshana*

2. What does “Aniimoosh” mean?

*Dog*

3. What will happen if they can’t train Mishtadim?

*He’ll be turned into dog food or glue.*

### REFLECTION

In your opinion, what is the meaning of Misko’s nightmare?

*Answers will vary*

# CHAPTER 23

# SUMMARY

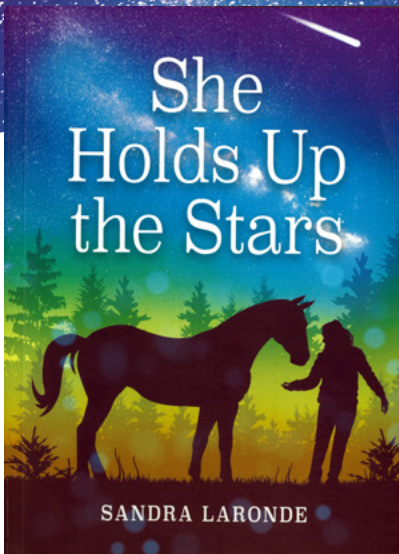
## In This Chapter...

Misko explains that they need to rename the horse "Mishtadim", instead of "Brutus", to give him a fresh start. Shoshana keeps watch outside in case Mr. Desjardins comes back.

Because Mishtadim is fearful and won't let Thomas approach, Misko is the only one who can train the horse. To begin, Thomas helps Misko practise how to put a halter on a fully-trained horse named Molly. During this time, Misko notices that the "shut-down" mare is gone, but she tries not to think about what happened to her.

After practising with Molly, Misko applies what she's learned with another trained horse named Snickers, receiving additional coaching from Thomas.

Now prepared, Misko approaches Mishtadim to put on the harness. She calms herself by inhaling positive memories and exhaling the bad ones. After making some progress with getting Mishtadim used to the rope, she gives him a break until tomorrow.



## CHAPTER 23

### COMPREHENSION

1. Why can't Thomas approach Mishtadim?

*Mishtadim is too fearful of Thomas.*

2. What does Misko learn how to do?

*How to put on a halter on a horse*

3. What does Misko do after getting Mistadim used to the rope?

*She gives him a break until tomorrow.*

### REFLECTION

What do you think Misko means when she says, "Even if he doesn't understand my words, I can still communicate with him through... well... *feeling.*" (p. 139)?

*Answers will vary*

# CHAPTER 24

# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

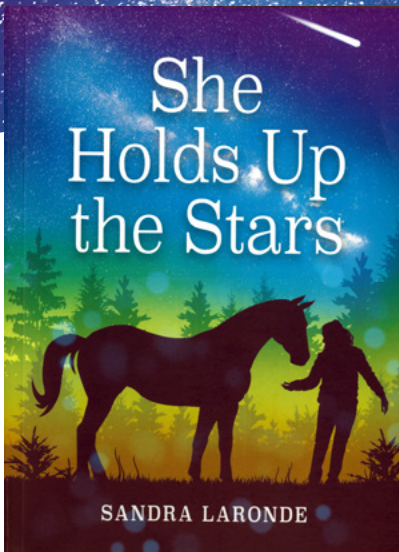
The next morning, Misko and Shoshana return with more carrots. Thomas scolds Misko for spoiling the horses, emphasizing the importance of obedience without constant treats.

Thomas teaches Misko how to ride a horse, using an experienced horse called Star. Misko believes Mr. Desjardins will be happy once Mishtadim is trained, but Thomas says that just means he'll be sold.

During their training, Thomas describes what "imprinting" is, explaining how a foal bonds with their mother and learns to trust. Misko realizes they need to spend time earning Mishtadim's trust. She communicates "from her mind to his without any words: I'm here to help you. I want you to know that you're not owned by anyone. You can still be wild when you want to be. You can still run like you were born free."

At last, she successfully puts on the halter on Mishtadim. Without realizing it, she tells the horse that she loves him and that she will stay on the rez. This admission completely surprises her. "Stay for how long? Is this my home now?" she wonders.

Thomas is impressed that Misko succeeded. The horse leans in, to "give her a horse hug", and she breaks down into tears. As they go back home, Misko prays to the Creator, Gichi Manitou, to keep Mishtadim safe.



## CHAPTER 24

### COMPREHENSION

1. What does Thomas predict will happen if they train Mishtadim?

*Mishtadim will be sold.*

2. What is Misko trying to build?

*Trust*

3. What surprises Misko after she puts the halter on Mishtadim?

*She says that she'll stay on the rez.*

### REFLECTION

Why is this chapter such an important moment in Misko's story?

*Answers will vary*

# CHAPTER 25

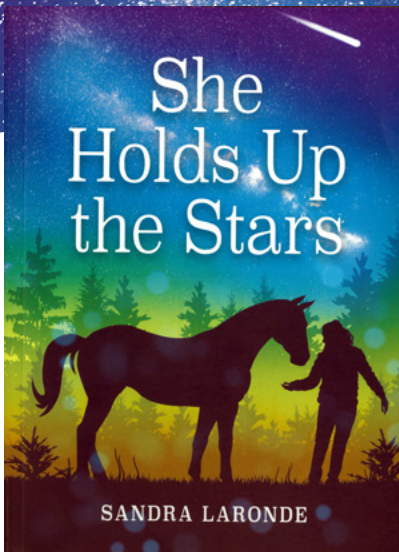
# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

On the next morning, Misko wakes up to find a scared Thomas at her doorstep at 6:00am. Mr. Desjardins had returned drunk last night and attacked Thomas. When Thomas had proudly shown him the newly trained Mishtadim, his father became enraged that the horse was treated so gently, and attacked Mishtadim with a whip. Thomas tried to intervene but was knocked over. Mishtadim defended himself from the attack by knocking Mr. Desjardins to the ground. Furious, Mr. Desjardins vowed to have the horse slaughtered.

Thomas says that they need to get Mishtadim away from his father. Misko thinks they should “borrow” the horse, until they figure out a real plan. Misko heads off with Thomas to get Mishtadim while Shoshana takes care of the puppy.

Misko carefully leads Mishtadim out of the barn. The horse is briefly distracted and afraid of his own shadow, but Misko reassures him. Courageously, Misko gets on Mishtadim’s back, and rides him to safety. When she meets Thomas, he is amazed to see her riding him.



## CHAPTER 25

### COMPREHENSION

1. Who is at Misko's door at 6:00am?

*Thomas*

2. What does Mr. Desjardins threaten to do to Mishtadim?

*Have him slaughtered*

3. Surprisingly, what is Misko able to do?

*Ride Mishtadim*

### REFLECTION

How do your strategies for calming yourself down compare with those of Misko?

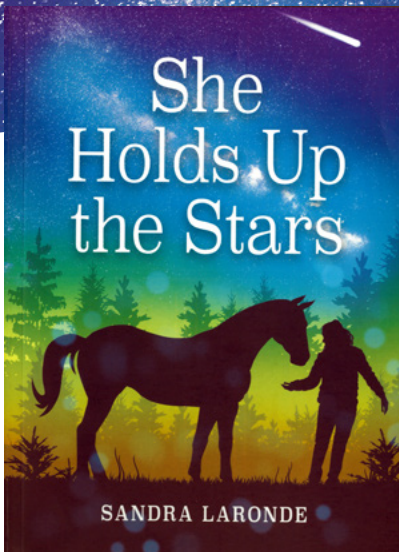
*Answers will vary*

# CHAPTER 26

# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

Misko urges Thomas to join her on Mishtadim's back, but he is hesitant. Misko outlines her plan: they'll hide in the bushes, build shelter, start a fire with matches, and forage for roots and berries. Thomas insists they can't keep running away. Misko accuses him of being afraid, prompting Thomas to remark that she runs from everything, much like her mother. Though hurt by his words, Misko realizes he's right and decides it's time to confront her fears. She resolves to stop running away. Thomas vows to confront his father, knowing his fear of loneliness. He plans to threaten to move to the reservation if his father persists in his old ways. Assured that he will protect the horse, Misko lets Thomas bring Mishtadim back to the ranch, as he goes to confront his father.



## CHAPTER 26

### COMPREHENSION

1. What is Misko's original plan?

*To hide in the bushes, build shelter, start a fire, and forage for roots and berries*

2. What does Misko resolve to stop doing?

*Running away*

3. Where do they bring Mishtadim?

*Back to the ranch*

### REFLECTION

How does the book depict running as something that can be either positive or negative?

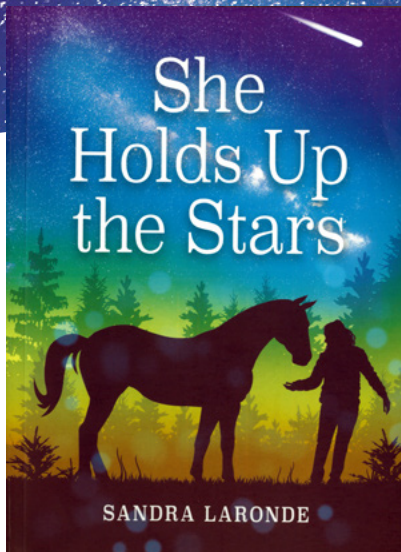
*Answers will vary*

# CHAPTER 27

# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

Misko paces anxiously, concerned about Thomas and Mishtadim's situation. She decides to confide in Kokum, who comforts her and, soon after, leaves to talk with Mr. Turner. Kokum instructs Misko to stay home in case Thomas returns. Later, Shoshana returns from the store and reveals that Kokum and Mr. Turner were secretly discussing something about Mishtadim.



## CHAPTER 27

### COMPREHENSION

1. Who does Misko tell her secrets to?

*Kokum*

2. Where is Misko told to stay?

*Home*

3. Where does Kokum go?

*To talk to Mr. Turner*

### REFLECTION

Why do you think it took so long for Misko to tell Kokum what was happening? Why is it important to speak up to a trusted adult when something is wrong?

*Answers will vary*

# CHAPTER 28

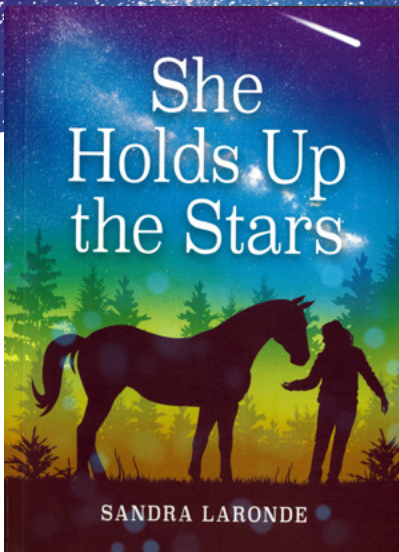
# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

Mr. Turner and Misko drive to the ranch. Thomas and his father are arguing about training Mishtadim. His father insists on his rules, but Thomas refuses, declaring he won't endure the abuse any longer and threatens to move to the reserve. His father scoffs and makes derogatory remarks about "those people." Misko gives Thomas an encouraging look. Thomas finally stands up for himself, and his father hits him in response. Thomas is about to retaliate when Mr. Turner intervenes.

Mr. Turner declares that he's purchasing the horse, because he knows Mr. Desjardins is in debt. Mr. Turner remarks that Mr. Desjardins was once a kind boy, and is sorry that his abusive upbringing has turned him into an embittered and angry man. Mr. Turner reprimands him because "only a coward beats a child".

Defeated, Mr. Desjardins backs down, gestures for them to take the horse, bids farewell to his son, and retreats into his house.



## CHAPTER 28

### COMPREHENSION

1. What does Thomas threaten to do if his father doesn't change?

*Move to the reserve*

2. What does Mr. Turner offer to do?

*Buy Mishtadim*

3. Why does Mr. Desjardins accept the offer?

*Because he is in debt*

### REFLECTION

Nobody is born hating other people. Where does hate come from, and how can we stop it?

*Answers will vary*

# CHAPTER 29

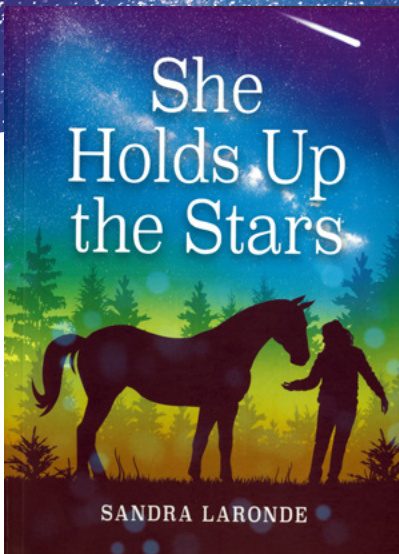
# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

Misko admires Thomas for standing up to his father. After returning home, she thanks Kokum for intervening, and tells her that she's proud to be her granddaughter. Kokum shows Misko a cut strawberry, which looks like a heart, and explains the importance of being good. Misko reflects on her own heart, and its connections to everything around her.

Kokum asks for a picture of Misko, and places it in the frame that still had the store-bought photo in it. With Misko's picture now among her family photos, she has symbolically found her place.

Misko falls asleep. In her dream, she sees her grandfather and mother, who express their love. Misko sees them travel across the Jibaykana, the Milky Way, the river in the sky. She wakes up to find Kokum affectionately stroking her.



## CHAPTER 29

### COMPREHENSION

1. How does Misko feel about her family now?

*Proud*

2. What does Misko do with the picture frame?

*She puts her photo inside and places it amongst the other family photos.*

3. Who are the people in Misko's dream?

*Her mother and grandfather*

### REFLECTION

What is the symbolism of Misko's picture being placed among other family photos at this moment in the story?

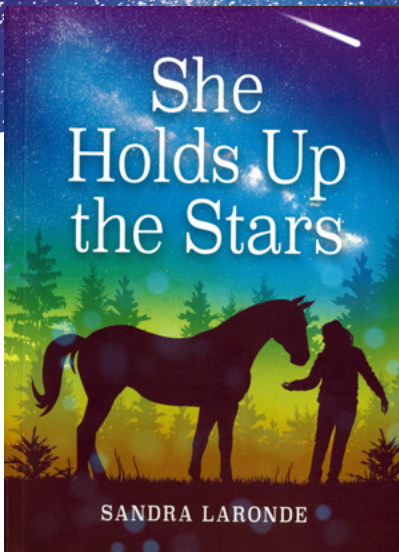
*Answers will vary*

# SUMMARY

## In This Chapter...

Misko announces she's decided to stay and live with Kokum. Shoshana mentions she won't be staying as much now, since she told her mom about being scared and the nursing staff have arranged to switch shifts around.

Mr. Turner comes over to visit, having finally overcome his guilt which prevented him from visiting before, and he brings Mishtadim. Mr. Turner explains that Mishtadim trusts Misko, and loves her. Misko and the horse go for a stroll together and both are happy.



## CHAPTER 30

### COMPREHENSION

1. How does Shoshana resolve her conflict, the fear of being alone?

*She tells her mother who then changes her work schedule*

2. Who finally makes a visit to Kokum's house?

*Mr. Turner*

3. Where does Mishtadim live now?

*At Mr. Turner's store*

### REFLECTION

What does Mishtadim symbolize?

*Answers will vary*

# SUMMARY

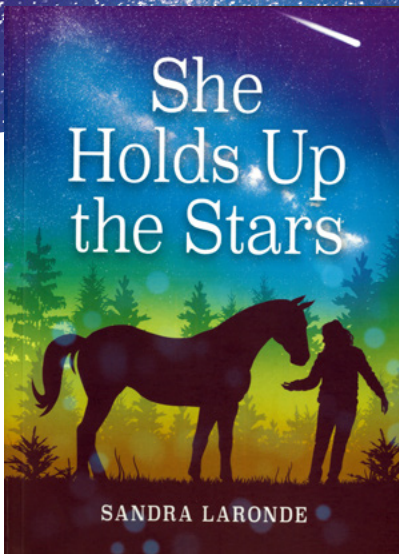
## In This Chapter...

Misko is riding Mishtadim, seeing the world from a new perspective. She notices a fence post resembling a carved totem and discovers a poem on two posts: "When you look up at the sky at night, I am the star who shines brightest for you." Misko wonders who wrote this.

She lies on her back in the sweetgrass, and inhales the scent, which Kokum said is good for memory. It suddenly becomes clear that her mother wrote those words. Misko breaks down into tears, releasing eight years of pent-up hurt, anger, and longing to see her mom. She cries out her love for her mother.

She comforts herself with Kokum's wisdom that losing someone doesn't mean ceasing communication with them.

Misko has a realization: the brightest star in the sky is the missing gem from her mother's bracelet, symbolizing her mother's enduring presence with her. This brings her comfort, likening it to finding her guiding star, her true home. She reflects how people say "you can never go back home once you leave", but thinks this is not entirely true. "In truth, home never leaves you."



## CHAPTER 31

### COMPREHENSION

1. What does Misko find on the posts?

*A poem*

2. Who wrote it?

*Misko's mother*

3. Fill in the blank: "In truth, \_\_\_\_\_ never leaves you."

*home*

### REFLECTION

What message did you take away from the book?

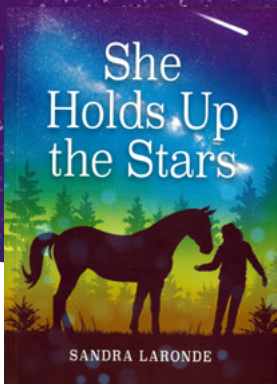
*Answers will vary*

# GLOSSARY

- ambe:** come  
**Ambe ooma:** Come join us  
**animikii:** the thunder beings  
**animoosh:** dog  
**Anishinaabe:** the human being  
**Anishinaabemowin:** the Ojibway language  
**azhegiweyin:** when you go back; the act of going back, returning  
**Bagonegiizhig:** translating directly to the Hole in the Sky, this is the cluster of stars that is considered the origin point for the Anishinaabe (what it also known as the Pleiades).  
**bineshiiwens:** little bird or baby bird  
**Bizindawishin:** Listen to me  
**Geezhigo-Kwe:** Sky Woman  
**Gichi Manitou:** the Great Mystery or the Creator  
**gidimaagendagozi:** A pitiful condition or state  
**giibi:** coming forward (prefix)  
**gizhawenimin:** I love you  
**Jibaykana:** The River of Souls (the Milky Way)  
**kawin:** no  
**Kokum:** Grandmother  
**manitou, nendamowin, wiiyw:** spirit, mind, body  
**mashkiki:** medicine  
**mbineshiwensin:** my little bird  
**miigwetch:** thank you  
**mijjim:** food  
**Mishoomis:** Grandfather  
**mishtadim:** big dog or big elk  
**miskobimizh:** red willow  
**mitig:** tree  
**N'Dakii Miinan:** our homeland  
**nichi:** friend  
**ninga:** Mother  
**Nokomis Giizis:** Grandmother Moon  
**ode'imin:** strawberry  
**odikosiw:** kidney  
**Odoobina'anangoog:** She Holds Up the Stars  
**okonima:** liver  
**onizhiishin:** it is good; looks good  
**shiiwaniibish:** dandelions  
**wiingashk:** sweetgrass  
**zhingwaak:** jack pine

# CHARACTERS & SETTINGS



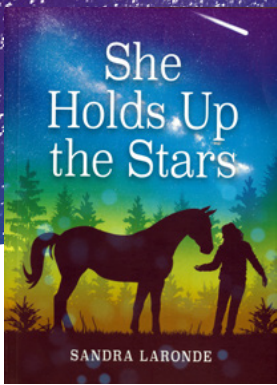


# CHARACTER LIST

## CHARACTERS

### MISKO

Misko, also known as *Miskobimizh*, meaning “Red Willow,” is the 12-year-old protagonist of ***She Holds Up the Stars***. She was nicknamed *Bineshiiwens* or “little bird” by her grandmother because of how small she was as a baby. Misko’s mother mysteriously disappeared when she was four years old. Misko lived on the reserve until she was six, then moved to Winnipeg to live with Auntie Madeleine for “a better education”. Due to the bullying and systemic racism she encounters, Misko struggles with internalized shame about her appearance and Indigenous identity. She is an excellent athlete and loves running on the track team because it’s the one place where she feels valued. Misko has a deep love for nature and reading. Described as very perceptive with a talent for connecting ideas, she is a keen appreciator of art, especially works by Benjamin Chee Chee, Norval Morrisseau, and Daphne Odjig. She is sent back to the rez by Auntie Madeleine to live with her grandmother after nearly being abducted by a stranger. Midway through the book, her cousin Autumn bestows her the name *Odoobina’anangoog*, meaning “She Holds Up the Stars”.



# CHARACTER LIST

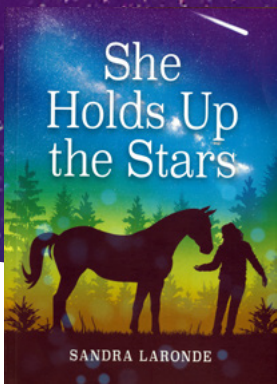
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## KOKUM

Kokum is Misko's grandmother. She has a gentle voice and cheeks that rise up when she smiles. As an Elder within the community, she often shares her wisdom with younger generations, especially her knowledge of medicine. Kokum is slowly healing from past trauma. She never went to residential school because she wasn't home when they came to scoop her. However, tragically, when Kokum had a child of her own, her eldest daughter Anna (Misko's mother) was forced to go to residential school and it broke Kokum's heart. As a result, Kokum protected her second daughter (Auntie Madeleine) by not registering the birth. Kokum is loving, welcoming, and fiercely protective of children, as evidenced in her honorary adoption of Shoshana and the urgency with which she intervenes to help Thomas.

## NOODIN

Noodin, Kokum's late husband and Misko's grandfather (*Mishoomis*), was a skilled athlete, particularly excelling in baseball. He is a survivor of residential schools. He was a close friend and coworker to Mr. Turner, but he unfortunately died in an accident when his truck fell through the ice and he succumbed to hypothermia. He appears in Misko's dreams as a spiritual guide, taking her in a canoe across the river of souls making their way home, also known as *Jibaykana* (The Milky Way).



# CHARACTER LIST

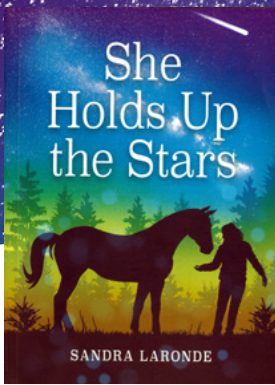
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## AUNTIE MADELEINE

Auntie Madeleine, nicknamed “Maddy,” is the relative who took care of Misko while she lived in Winnipeg. Seven years younger than her sister Anna, Madeleine was protected from residential schools by her mother not registering her birth. Confident and highly ambitious, Madeleine moved to Winnipeg to pursue new opportunities. She recently cut her hair short, purchased stylish pant suits, and began a new job with extended hours. Due to her busy schedule, she doesn’t have time to make home-cooked meals with Misko. Nevertheless, she cares deeply about Misko, insisting that she go live with Kokum on the reserve for her own safety after a stranger in Winnipeg slapped and almost abducted Misko.

## ANNA, MISKO’S MOTHER

Anna, Misko’s mother and Kokum’s first daughter, disappeared eight years ago, when Misko was only four years old. Kind and loving, Anna shares many qualities with her daughter Misko, including their love of running and a knack for training horses. Anna survived the residential school system, but was scarred by the experience, both physically (on the wrists) and mentally. Before disappearing, Anna commemorated the people she knew who survived residential schools by carving their names into a nearby fence. What happened to Anna remains a mystery, but she regularly appears in Misko’s dreams. Coincidentally, when Anna was Misko’s age, she also had a friendship with a horse named Mishtadim and the rancher’s neighbour’s son (Mr. Desjardins as a boy).



# CHARACTER LIST

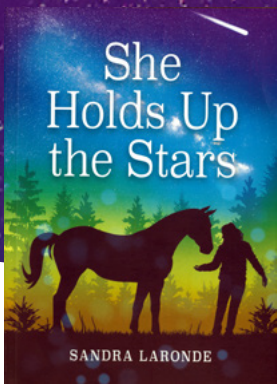
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## MISHTADIM

Mishtadim is the horse that Misko falls in love with and the struggle to help him is the primary external conflict of the book. The name Mishtadim is an Anishinaabemowin word meaning “big dog or big elk”. As a young foal, Mishtadim was separated from his mother, hindering his ability to form strong bonds with either horses or people. Currently 2.5 years old, Mishtadim still carries the effects of this early separation. At the top of the story, Mishtadim is owned by the neighbouring Desjardins family, but they have named him “Brutus” due to his wild temperament and his stubborn refusal to accept their cruel horse breaking methods. Mishtadim is described as having a powerful brown body, long lean legs, a black mane with a matching tail, and big beautiful eyes.

## SHOSHANA

Shoshana is a 10-year-old girl who was honorarily adopted by Kokum after her own grandmother died. Of mixed heritage with a white father and an Indigenous mother, Shoshana is described as pretty, with round, bright green eyes and short light brown hair. She wears a denim jacket and exudes confidence. Shoshana speaks quickly and often starts her sentences with “Oh!”. She loves school, gets straight As, and wants to go to university one day. Every few nights, she comes over to “night-sit” Kokum. At first, Misko is threatened by and jealous of Shoshana, but they eventually become close friends.



# CHARACTER LIST

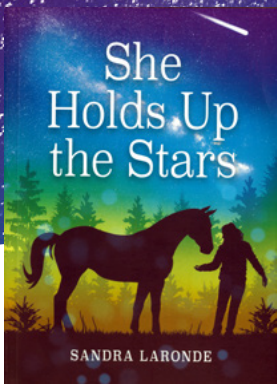
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## THOMAS

Thomas is the eldest son of Mr. Desjardins, the neighbouring rancher. He has blond hair and blue eyes, standing half a head taller than Misko. He lives alone with his father, who heavily relies on him. Thomas assists in the task of raising and breaking horses, continuing a tradition spanning three generations. Named after his grandfather, Thomas feels pressure from his father to toughen up and live up to his grandfather's legacy. Desperate for his father's approval, Thomas pretends to be tough, but inside he is actually sensitive, caring, and empathetic, going as far as justifying his father's abusive behaviours because of his own hard life. Thomas' mother is often absent, residing mostly in Kenora, Ontario, with Thomas' younger three-year-old brother Billy. Thomas' father's alcoholism surfaces in his mean streaks, prompting his mother to occasionally take Billy away for safety.

## MR. DESJARDINS

Mr. Desjardins, Thomas's father, serves as the primary antagonist and villain of the story. Tall and muscular with dirty blond hair greying at the temples, he walks with a slight forward lean. Alcoholic, Mr. Desjardins is abusive not only to his wife and two sons but also to the horses in his care. As a child, he was known to be kind, and even had a friendship with Misko's mother, however his toxic relationship with his own abusive father has transformed him into a cruel and hateful man. He harbours many racist attitudes toward his Indigenous neighbours.



# CHARACTER LIST

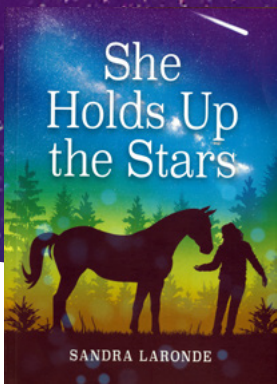
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## MR. TURNER

Willis Turner, known as Mr. Turner, the local shopkeeper, is a sturdy and tall figure who has lived in the community for many years and is acquainted with everyone. Despite a reputation for being stern, he is actually a kind-hearted man. Widowed after a 40-year marriage, Mr. Turner was a close friend and co-worker to Misko's late grandfather, Noodin. Mr. Turner carries immense guilt for Noodin's tragic death: during an accident where their pickup truck fell through ice, Noodin was driving and trapped on the driver's side as the truck sank. Mr. Turner managed to escape from the passenger side, but blamed himself for not rescuing Noodin in time to save him from dying of hypothermia.

## AUTUMN

Autumn, Misko's cousin, only makes a brief appearance but leaves a lasting impression. Six years older than Misko and notably confident, Autumn talks passionately about her plans to study astronomy and return home afterward. She challenges the idea that coming back to the rez is a failure. To her, it's not a "reserve", which is a government construct, but rather, her ancestral land, where multiple generations of women lived. Autumn's pride in her roots ignites a sense of belonging in Misko. Autumn is the one who dubs Misko, "She Holds Up the Stars". Overall, Autumn is someone Misko deeply admires, and is considered a role model and older sister figure.



# CHARACTER LIST

*(Continued)*

## **NELSON, NIMKII, SAGE, KIIWEDIN, SADIE, KIERA, ZACH**

These are local Indigenous children that Misko played with six years ago. They are friendly and creative, often inviting Misko to join them for fun activities. Nelson drives an ATV and occasionally transports Misko around the rez. Nimkii has aspirations to be a singer and would like to do the powwow circuit all over Turtle Island.

## **UNCLE ZIIBI**

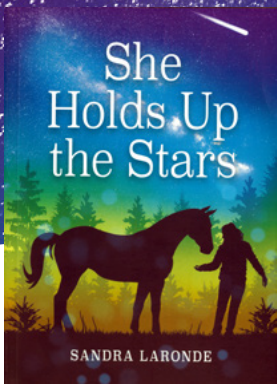
Uncle Ziibi is Misko's mother's cousin. He was sent to residential school and attempted to escape. As punishment for this, he was forcefully slammed headfirst into a radiator, resulting in the loss of his front teeth.

## **MOLLY, SNICKERS, STAR**

These are the fully-trained horses at Mr. Desjardins' ranch that Thomas uses to teach Misko how to halter a horse.

## **JOHN-JOHN**

A local man who says everything twice.



# SETTINGS

## SETTINGS

### THE CITY (WINNIPEG)

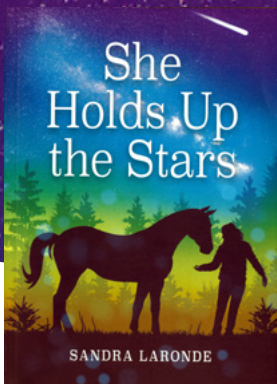
This is where Misko lived with her Auntie Madeleine. Misko got slapped and nearly abducted by a stranger in the city, motivating Auntie Madeleine to send Misko to live with Kokum on the rez for the summer. At the start of the story, Misko desperately wants to return to Winnipeg, even though she experiences bullying at school and living there prevents her from truly connecting with her family.

### THE RESERVE (“THE REZ”)

This is the Indigenous community where Kokum’s house is located, and where Misko is sent to live for the summer. As the place where Misko grew up, the rez is home to most of Misko’s family and childhood friends. There is a strong sense of community here, where everyone knows everyone. It is located near Cross Lake, Manitoba.

### THE RANCH

Across the fence from Kokum’s house, there is a ranch where Mr. Desjardins and his son Thomas raise and break horses. This is where Mishtadim lives at the start of the story.



# SETTINGS

*(Continued)*

## MR. TURNER'S STORE

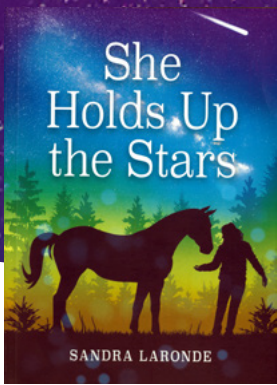
Mr. Turner's One-Stop Grocery Store serves both rez and ranch residents. Mr. Turner has been running the store for decades and has seen people (like Mr. Desjardins) grow up and start families of their own. At the end of the story, Mishtadim lives here, just like Misko's mother's pony did.

## JIBAYKANA (THE MILKY WAY)

Appearing mostly in Misko's dreams, the "Jibaykana" or Milky Way, is a spiritual pathway for souls making their way home. Guided by her grandfather Noodin, Misko travels across this river in a birchbark canoe, and communicates with her mother.

# LITERARY DEVICES





# LITERARY DEVICES

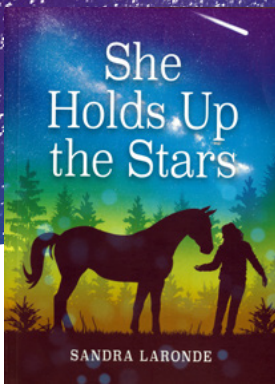
## THEMES

### BELONGING

One of the central themes of *She Holds Up the Stars* is belonging. The questions “*Where do I belong?*” and “*Who am I?*” are explored on many levels—through family, community, land, and even the universe itself.

Misko’s journey is ultimately one of finding her place in all of these. On a personal level, she begins the story carrying shame about her Indigenous identity. But as she comes to know her relatives and recognize their strengths, she begins to feel pride in belonging to her family. On a communal level, Misko is certain at first that she wants to return to Winnipeg. Over time, however, new relationships—helping her Kokum, raising Mishtadim—give her a sense of being valued and appreciated, and she chooses to stay on the rez.

Finally, on the largest scale, Misko experiences a force that connects her to all living beings—humans, animals, trees, plants—and to her ancestors in the starworld. This cosmic sense of belonging comes full circle when she receives her Indigenous name: *She Holds Up the Stars*.



# LITERARY DEVICES

*(Continued)*

## **BELONGING** – Relevant Quotes:

### **Page 172:**

“Heartstrings connecting us to everything and everyone and tugging on us to make us feel our own humanity. Even animals, trees, and plants have them. Not just humans.”

### **Page 21:**

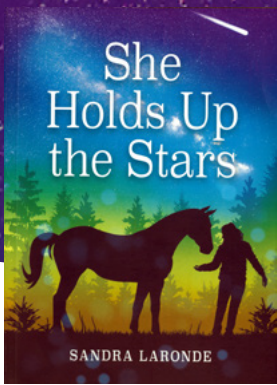
“And Norval Morrisseau from the Indian Group of Seven, who painted lines not seen by the human eye, lines that connected everything. It was like he had X-ray vision, Misko had thought”

### **Page 30-31:**

“These dark lines connected everything, and she could circle back and trace them all over again and again. She thought that she was just tracing lines back then, but in this moment, it felt as though she had climbed inside of that painting and traced everything again. But this time, it was with a knowingness of where everything belonged. No, where everyone belonged—whether it be tree, rock, sun, human, or insect—all interconnected by a web of invisible lines.”

### **Page 40:**

“She felt a kind of gravitational pull from the stars. The kind of pull that never gets talked about in school. An ancestral pull. And when she blinked, the stars seemed to blink back.”



# LITERARY DEVICES

*(Continued)*

**Page 49:**

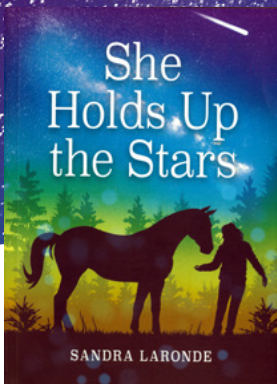
"She then drew one big circle and said, "This is family," (...) "Everything's round, m'girl" (...) "All these circles need to stay joined, connected." (...) "You can't replace people. But you can take people in, adopt them, make them your friend, make them your sister or your brother. Everyone becomes your family. That's love, m'girl, and that's what we Anishinaabe do."

**Pg. 101:**

"It's not about the rez. That's just a government construct. I'm talking about the land, our homeland. N'Dakii Miinan. I was born and grew up here, and so was my mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, and so on down the line. Maybe it's through osmosis or something, but the spirit of the land gets inside you. It never leaves you. Maybe it's the ancestors in my blood memory who guide me, but I definitely know where I belong."

**Pg. 101:**

"Of course, city people will say that moving back home after university means that I failed somehow," continued Autumn. "That I somehow couldn't make it in the city, and had to move back. But that won't be the case. The land calls you home."



# LITERARY DEVICES

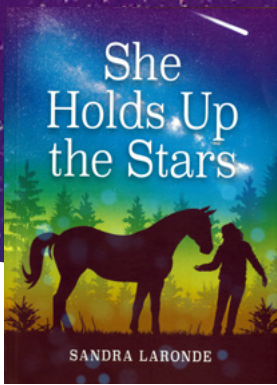
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## MOTIFS

(repeated objects, images, sounds, or phrases)

### 1. CIRCLES

Circles are an integral part of Indigenous ways of understanding, and they appear throughout ***She Holds Up the Stars***, especially when the Elder character Kokum shares her wisdom. Circles are tied to the concepts of equality, connection, sustainability, sharing, gifts, gratitude, and the cycle of life. In the book, circles are sometimes contrasted with squares, which are tied to concepts of hierarchy, division, overconsumption, taking, commodities, and selfishness. Circles are used to explain that humans are not hierarchically superior to nature, but rather are equal to all living beings. Circles illustrate that we are all interconnected and interdependent, and therefore vulnerable if we do not sustain healthy and respectful relationships. As part of these relationships, the personhood of plants and animals are recognized—they are beings not things—and the resources they provide are considered gifts, not commodities that can be exploited. These reciprocal relationships are what sustain all life in the Anishinaabe way of life.



# LITERARY DEVICES

*(Continued)*

## **CIRCLES - Relevant Quotes:**

### **Page 6:**

"Kokum drew the outline of a tiny box with her hands. "Them birds go right inside and what do they do? They build a nest. They build round inside. I don't know why the white man wants to put everything in a box. Even cut up our land into boxes.""

### **Page 12:**

"The house was square, but this patchwork place felt cozy and somehow round inside. Probably because it feels loved."

### **Page 38:**

"Every plant has a gift. You just have to know how to see its gift to release it."

### **Page 39:**

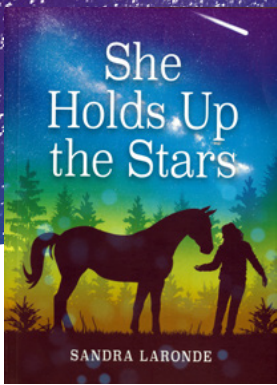
"M'girl, trees are not a what; they are a who. Mitig, that's how we say tree in our language. Mitig is alive like us."

### **Page 77:**

"Why do humans get to own everything?"

"Ah... because we're smarter and better than all of the other animals put together," Thomas said unemotionally.

"But we're not. Humans aren't better and we're not at the top. Kokum says humans need animals to survive, but they don't need us. We need plants to survive, but they don't need us. They could live without us, but we can't live without them. Ever think of that?"



# LITERARY DEVICES

*(Continued)*

**Page 115:**

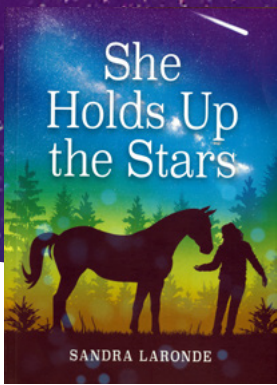
“She hated this stupid wooden barrier that was built to separate, and to keep her kind corralled like animals.”

**Page 185:**

“Those stars up there are not just balls of gas—they’re our relatives, too. Someday we’ll go back there because it’s where we come from. Everything comes full circle, and everything’s round, m’girl. It’s love that we came with, and it’s love that we go with.”

## 2. “BREAKING”

The phrase “breaking”, a term from the horse training world, is applied to people many times and could be defined as the use of punishment to force obedience. This is closely related to what makes Mishtadim symbolic, as there are many direct comparisons between the breaking of horses and the abhorrent treatment of Indigenous children at residential schools. However, the term “breaking” is also used more broadly in the book and applied to non-Indigenous characters, such as when describing how Mr. Desjardins was broken by his father. Another recurring and closely related term is “shut-down”, which is a dejected, hopeless state that comes as a result of too much abuse. The mare closest to Mishtadim and Thomas’ mother are both similarly described as “shut-down”.



# LITERARY DEVICES

*(Continued)*

## **“BREAKING” - Relevant Quotes:**

### **Page 13:**

“They probably never came back for her because she was the eldest child in her family. Younger children were preferred as they were much easier to break.”

### **Page 18:**

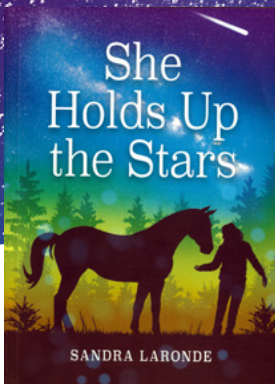
“Why do you have to break everything anyway?” she shouted. She thought of the man who slapped her and how he had tried to break her, too.”

### **Page 58:**

Thomas stared at her. “You’re nuts.” But he wasn’t shouting. “People don’t break children. Just animals.” “They were treated like animals,” she shot back. “Beaten like animals, their hair shaved off like animals. And it was way worse for kids who tried to run away or broke the rules.”

### **Page 81:**

“The horse closest to Mishtadim didn’t move at all when she went by. The mare looked scraggly with uneven ears; she didn’t even lift her head, sniff, or stomp. Misko could see that the mare’s eyes were dull. “Oh! She looks... so sad.” She turned to Thomas. “There’s no light in her eyes. How come?”



# LITERARY DEVICES

*(Continued)*

**Page 115:**

"The woman had a distant look in her eyes. She wore no makeup and she looked tired and faded like a shirt washed too often. She turned and walked toward the house without speaking, without comforting her little boy, and without saying hello to her older son. Her husband caught up to her and they walked inside together."

**Page 89:**

"Look, my dad's had a hard life, you know. His dad was hard on him, beat him up pretty bad, so he gets mean when he drinks. My dad says that the world has teeth and it bites, so you'd better bite first. I know he's hard, but you got to understand that his heart's in the right place."

**Page 96:**

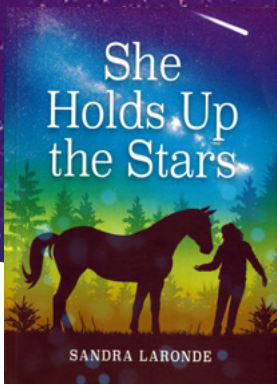
"She wondered if he used to be like his own son, all smirks and jokes, just waiting for the pretend tough-guy surface to be cracked open. She wondered what broke Thomas's father."

**Page 119:**

"I guess it's the way he was raised. My granddad beat up on my dad. Broke him, as you say. I guess my granddad broke everything in his life—broke his horses, beat his wife, beat his kids, and kicked the dog. It was dead wrong. Now my dad does the same to us."

**Page 169:**

"I remember you and your father coming to my store when you were a young whippersnapper. Back then, you



# LITERARY DEVICES

*(Continued)*

didn't have all of this... this hate inside of you. But now I can plainly see that you suffered at the hands of your own father. And I'm sorry for that. I can see that all that hurt is still inside of you like an old fever. This much I know, hurt people *hurt* people."

## 3. OVERCOMING FEAR

Fear appears throughout the book for different characters. Whether it's Kokum and Shoshana being afraid of being alone at night, Mishtadim being afraid of his shadow, or Thomas being afraid of his father, it's clear that "everyone gets afraid sometimes." (p. 71) Ultimately, the characters find ways to face their fears and overcome them.

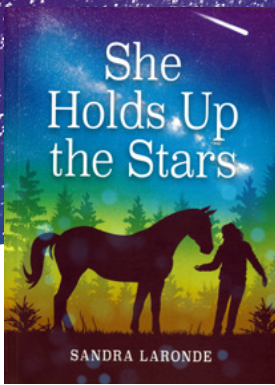
### OVERCOMING FEAR – Relevant Quotes:

#### Page 45:

"Oh, I... I don't want anything. Honest. It's just that Kokum is sometimes afraid at night. She's afraid to be alone at her age... She has bad dreams and wakes up. So, I night-sit her. Like babysitting but at night."

#### Page 70:

For once, Shoshana spoke slowly, her words spaced apart, and not a waterfall of words. "Sometimes, when my daddy is away, my mom works night shifts and I'm alone and..."



# LITERARY DEVICES

*(Continued)*

Tears slipped from her eyes. "And... I get scared"  
"You're scared? I thought it was my grandmother who was scared."

"She is. But Kokum doesn't know I'm scared, too."

**Page 154:**

"Misko, I'm afraid of what my dad might do to Mishtadim. We need to get him away from here."

**Page 157:**

"It finally clicked for Misko that the horse might be a little bit afraid of his own shadow. She instinctively put her hands on Mishtadim's head and turned it toward the sun. He shook his head as if trying to get rid of an itch in his nose and then his body softened."

**Page 159:**

Thomas signed. "I promise I won't let my dad hurt him."

"You know you can't stand up to him. You're afraid of your dad, you're afraid of Mishtadim—I bet you're even afraid of your own Shadow!"

"I am not!"

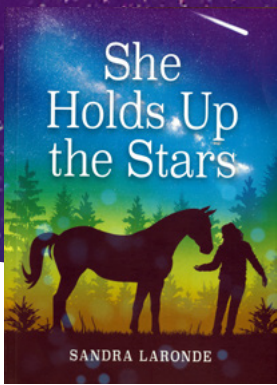
"You are, too! Scaredy-cat!"

"I am not! And what about you, huh?"

"You run away from everything when you're scared... just like your mother!"

**Page 160:**

"Right then and there, Misko took a bold step. She decided not to let her fear take control. There would be no more running away."



# LITERARY DEVICES

*(Continued)*

## 4. RUNNING

Running appears as a recurring motif, both in positive and negative ways. On the one hand, running is something that makes Misko feel powerful and respected. It's an expression of self-determination, like a horse running freely. On the flip side, running is associated with fear, and trauma, like the Indigenous children running away from residential schools, or a person metaphorically running away from their problems instead of facing them.

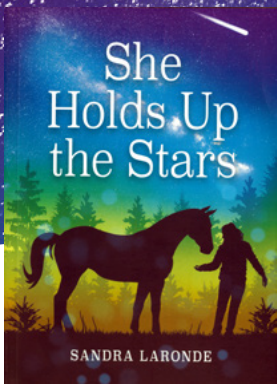
### **RUNNING** - Relevant Quotes:

#### **Page 19:**

"But she did have something that she loved back in Winnipeg. She had the track team and running made her feel powerful. Running made her feel visible. Running made her feel like a star. So, right now, she ran as fast as she could. Up the hill, away from the boy, away from Kokum's house. Running. Like the horse. Like my mother."

#### **Page 160:**

"Why should I be the girl who runs away? I didn't do anything wrong. Am I running because I'm afraid? She pictured all of the running in her mind. Her mother and all the little boys and girls running away from residential schools, and her own running away from the predator who tried to abduct her. There was so much fear and so much running. It just isn't fair that we have to run away like victims on our own land. Right then and there, Misko took a bold step. She decided not to let her fear take control."



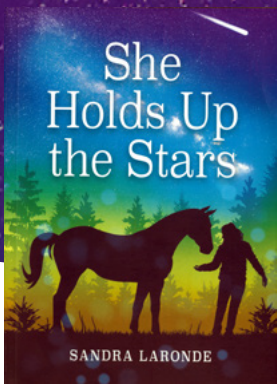
# LITERARY DEVICES

*(Continued)*

## SYMBOLS

### 1. MISHTADIM

Mishtadim is a symbol for reconciliation. The book draws many parallels between the life of Mishtadim and Indigenous families, with direct comparisons between horse breaking and residential schools. As a young foal, Mishtadim is torn away from his mother, preventing him from bonding with her and shattering his ability to trust. He is then stripped of his name, and broken, a training method that uses punishment to force obedience. Similarly, Indigenous children were scooped away from their families, preventing them from learning their culture, or even practising it, and losing the ability to trust. They were stripped of their name and given numbers instead, and broken, through a “school” system that was actually a tool for cultural genocide. Misko makes a direct comparison between the two when she explains that Indigenous children “were treated like animals”. As the story progresses, Misko teaches Thomas how to take a reconciliatory approach, based around respect, dignity, and rebuilding Mishtadim’s trust. At one point, Misko uses geese flying as a metaphor for shared leadership and embracing reconciliation.



# LITERARY DEVICES

*(Continued)*

## Reconciliation - Relevant Quotes:

### Page 57:

"You tear him away from his mother and his home and then expect him to be 'good.' On top of that, you give him an awful name and force him to behave how you want him to. Maybe he doesn't want to be broken. Maybe he just misses his mom; ever think of that?"

"Like I said, we're trying to break him for his—"

"For his own good, yeah, you said that already. That's your answer for everything, isn't it? Break this and break that. Break down, break horses. Break, break, break... What's next, me?"

"What are you talking about?" He grabbed her arm and then let go when he saw her eyes narrow.

"I'm talking about kids our age or younger being broken. You know, ripped away from their homes, their moms and dads, brothers and sisters."

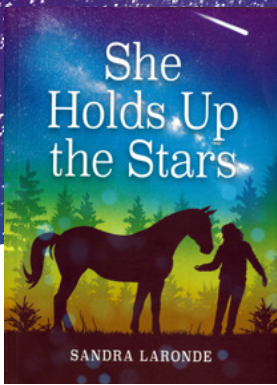
### Page 58:

"You're nuts." But he wasn't shouting. "People don't break children. Just animals."

"They were treated like animals," she shot back.

### Page 110:

"M'girl, there are bad things that happen in the world. That school that your mom got sent to was one of those bad things," Kokum lamented. "Them people stole her ability to trust. That's how they crushed them. Never let them do that to you."



# LITERARY DEVICES

*(Continued)*

**Page 122:**

“You said you’ll run things differently when the ranch is yours (...) You see, Thomas, how the geese all take turns being in front and falling back when they get tired. The ones in the back cheer on the ones in front to keep them going. Someday, your dad will fall back and it’ll be your turn to be out front. So start now,” she pleaded. “Start right now with Mishtadim.”

**Page 148:**

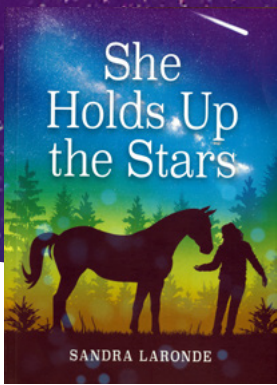
“That’s when the mare licks and rubs her newborn. The foal bonds with her and knows he’s a horse. He knows her sound and smell. He knows she’s his mom. And sort of do the same thing with the foal. We rub the foal all over, so it knows a human won’t hurt him. That kind of thing. You build trust that way. If we spend time, this horse can learn to trust again.”

**Page 151:**

“Whoa! How did you do that? How did you ever get to talk horse so well?” exclaimed Thomas. “Dunno. I just try to see everything from his point of view. I build trust with him one step at a time.”

**Page 178:**

“Yesiree, if you treat a horse with kindness, you get a horse that will give you absolutely everything. Now, you have to earn a horse’s trust, but once you do, it’s a beautiful privilege that you get to keep. And that there horse trusts you, Misko.”



# LITERARY DEVICES

*(Continued)*

## 2. THE EMPTY PICTURE FRAME

The empty picture frame in Kokum's wall unit symbolizes Misko's place in her family. At the start of the story, when she does not yet feel a true sense of belonging, there is no picture of her among the photos of her family. At the end of her character arc, once she feels proud of and connected to her family, her picture is finally added.

### Picture Frame – Relevant Quotes:

#### Page 4:

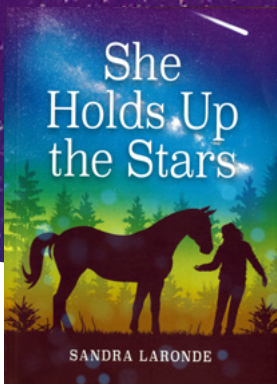
"There were many other framed photos—in sepia, black and white, and colour—but most were frameless snapshots. There were pictures of great grandparents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, siblings, children, babies, and pets. Misko could see a familiar glint in her relatives' dark brown eyes. It was like looking at many versions of her own face, staring back at her across generations of time."

#### Page 174:

"She then placed it on the wall unit next to the photo of her mother with Mishtadim, her pony. She stepped back for a moment to get a better perspective of herself among all of her relatives. She took a deep breath and exhaled. Family."

# ACTIVITY IDEAS





# ACTIVITY IDEAS

## VISUAL ART

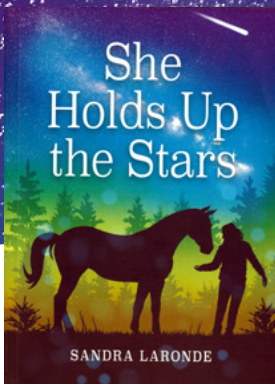
### DESIGN A NEW BOOK COVER

Students can submit a new book cover design to us for a chance to be featured in the pre-concert trivia, in the program book, or on social media!

#### Step 1 -

Lead a group discussion to help students analyze the existing cover of the book using the elements of art:

- **What shapes do you see?** (shape of horse/Mishtadim, shape of girl/Misko, shape of trees and plants—do you recognize any of the trees?)
- **What colours do you see?** (black, orange, yellow, green, blue, white, and the many gradient colours in between.)
- **Do you see any lines?** (shooting star, blades of grass)
- **What textures do you see?** (smooth texture of silhouettes, sprayed texture for the stars, prickly texture around trees and plants)
- **Consider the element of value, are the colours dark or light?**
- **Consider the element of space, is there a sense of depth or is the image flat? Can you see something in the foreground, middleground, and background? What do you see?** (foreground: the horse, the girl, the ground, middleground: trees and plants, background: the stars, the Milky Way, and space)
- **Does this represent a scene from the book? What is happening in this scene? How does this image make you feel?**



# ACTIVITY IDEAS

*(Continued)*

## Step 2 -

Now it's your turn! Tell your students to imagine that ***She Holds Up the Stars*** is being reprinted in a new edition, and the book publisher is asking them to design a different cover.

Have students choose a scene from the book and illustrate it. Encourage students to pick different scenes, and to consider different perspectives.

Students should be mindful of the art style they choose. Our recommendation would be to use a naturalistic style (i.e. if drawing a horse, use a reference photo of a horse as inspiration). Please note: You may wish to show students examples of the Woodlands art style, given its connection to Ontario and the book's mention of paintings by Norval Morrisseau, Daphne Odjig, or Benjamin Chee Che. If you do introduce this style to students, please be mindful that you should also talk about [appropriation](#). Your students will naturally take inspiration from these beautiful works, but producing this type of art style should be left to authentic Indigenous artists.

## Step 3 -

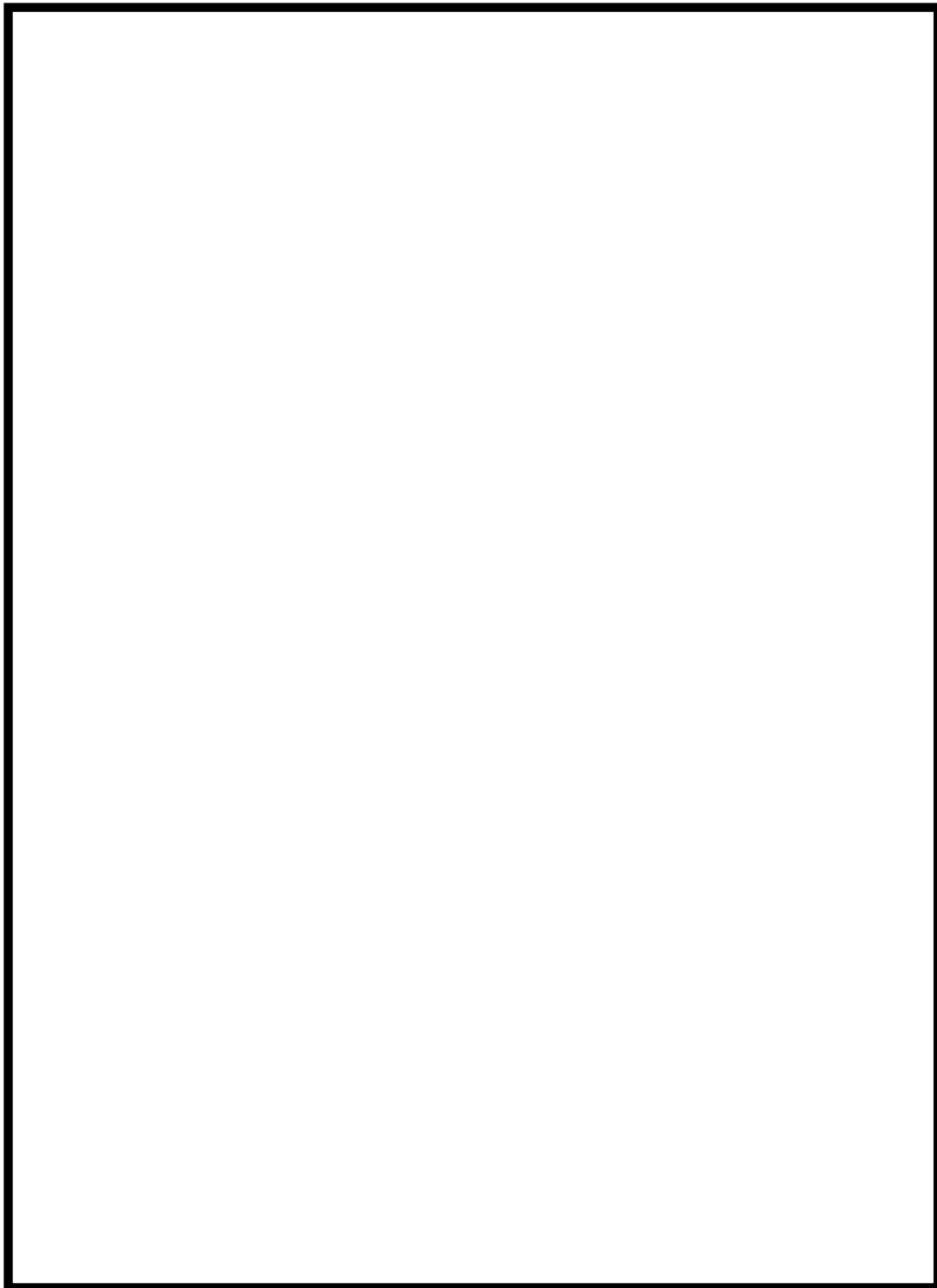
Submit your students' artwork via email to:

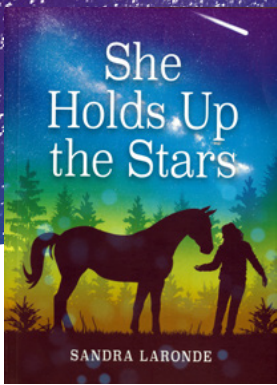
**SchoolConcerts@TSO.CA**

Submissions are due no later than March 15, 2026.

# MY BOOK COVER DESIGN

**NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_ **GRADE:** \_\_\_\_\_

A large, empty rectangular box with a thick black border, intended for the student to draw their book cover design.



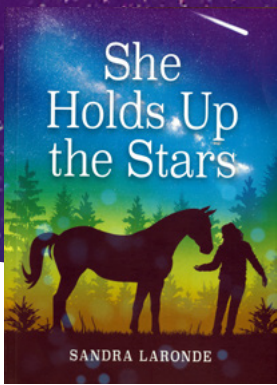
# ACTIVITY IDEAS

## MUSIC

### COMMUNITY SOUNDSCAPE

Have students explore and reflect on their community by identifying, recording, and recreating the unique sounds of a chosen location.

- 1. Introduce the Concept:** Explain what a soundscape is — a collection of sounds that represent a place or environment.
- 2. Choose a Community Location:** Ask students to pick a familiar place in their community (e.g. park, street, school, market).
- 3. Observe:** Have students visit the location and do one or more of the following:
  - Sit quietly and listen.
  - Write down all the sounds they hear.
  - Record audio (optional)
- 4. Create the Soundscape:** Back in class or at home, students can:
  - Combine recorded sounds using a simple audio editor (e.g. GarageBand, Audacity).
  - Imitate or recreate the sounds using voice, instruments, or objects.
  - Present their soundscape with a short explanation of the place and sounds.



# ACTIVITY IDEAS

*(Continued)*

**5. Share and Reflect:** Students present their soundscapes and discuss what they learned about their community through listening.

## Soundscapes - Relevant Quotes:

### Page 116:

"As she often did, Misko turned her attention to the sounds of nature for comfort. She heard overtones in the wind and the chattering of poplar leaves. She soaked in the humming of insects through her pores; she could hear the buzz of a bee up close or the bark of a rez dog in the distance. She followed the outline of the trees on the horizon with her voice, following its dips and rises as though they were musical notes. She listened to the natural world as if her entire body was one giant ear hearing nature's orchestra."

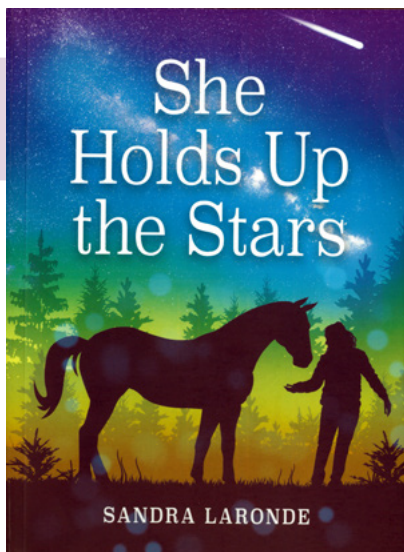
### Page 100:

"Snuggled and warm in her bed, Misko heard the rain's watery melody whisper and shush, and she felt surrounded by everything that ever was. When the rain started coming down harder, she felt the excitement as the staggered, uproarious beats came down faster, as if she had climbed inside a big, tight drum."

# ABOUT THE CONCERT



# CONCERT OVERVIEW



## SHE HOLDS UP THE STARS

### Gr. 5–9 School Concert

#### DATES

April 13, 2026 - 10:30am & 12:30pm

April 14, 2026 - 10:30am & 12:30pm

April 15, 2026 - 10:30am & 12:30pm

#### DESCRIPTION

Red Sky Performance, a leading company of contemporary Indigenous performance, returns to the TSO with ***She Holds Up the Stars***. Created and directed by Sandra Laronde and based on her award-winning novel, this groundbreaking production blends an original Indigenous story with life-sized puppets, movement, storytelling, theatre, visual design, and Eliot Britton's orchestral score.

***She Holds Up the Stars*** follows a young Indigenous girl searching for her mother's truth. Through an unexpected bond with a spirited horse, she finds courage and resilience in a world shaped by beauty and cruelty, and the deep pull of land and family.

#### DURATION

This concert lasts approximately 55 minutes with no intermission.



## THE CREATIVE TEAM

### SHE HOLDS UP THE STARS

An Original Production of **Red Sky Performance**

Written, Created, and Directed by **Sandra Laronde**

Music & Sound Design by **Eliot Britton**

Commissioned by the **Toronto Symphony Orchestra** (World Premiere)  
with the **Vancouver Symphony Orchestra** in association with **TO Live** and  
**National Arts Centre's National Creation Fund.**

Conducted by **Trevor Wilson**

Puppetry Design: **Nick Barnes**

Puppetry & Movement Director: **Scarlet Wilderink**

Puppet Design Associate: **Caroline Bowman**

Lighting Design: **Jason Hand**

Scenic Prop Design: **Ken Mackenzie**

Costume Design & Coordination: **Lesley Hampton**

Other Puppetry Design: **Amelia Blaine**

Video Design: **Febby Tan**

Recorded vocals: **Jen Brousseau, Don Kavanaugh, Barbara Laronde,  
Marion Blake, Verla Moore, Caroline Pridham**

Stage Manager: **Carla Ritchie**

Assistant Stage Manager: **Kelsey Jensen**

Actors: **Julia Davis, James Gerus, Marsha Knight, Hilary Wheeler,  
Geoffrey Pounsett, Mike Shara, Kehew Buffalo**

Puppeteers: **Troy Feldman, Dayna Tietzen, Brad Cook, Jainee Fernandez**

Project Manager: **Siobhan Quinn**

# PERFORMERS



## SANDRA LARONDE

**Playwright & Director of *She Holds Up the Stars*  
Founder & Artistic Director of Red Sky Performance**

Sandra Laronde is a highly accomplished arts innovator, multidisciplinary artist, and leader.

Sandra Laronde is from the Teme-Augama Anishinaabe (People of the Deep Water) and grew up in Temagami, Ontario. After graduation from the University of Toronto (Honours Bachelor of Arts),

she founded Red Sky Performance in 2000, named after her Anishinaabemowin name, Misko Kizhigoo Migizii Kwe, meaning Red Sky Eagle Woman.

An accomplished arts innovator, multi-disciplinary artist, and visionary leader, Laronde plays a pivotal role in the ongoing Indigenous cultural resurgence of Canada. The award-winning novel, *She Holds Up the Stars*, is her debut novel.

Acclaimed for her bold and inspiring multidisciplinary practice in dance, theatre, live music and media, Laronde has built an extraordinary body of work with brilliant collaborators over the past 25 years. Under her leadership, Red Sky Performance has toured to 24 countries across four continents.

Her inexhaustible energy extends to cultural diplomacy, forging stronger ties by representing Canada on prestigious global stages and at influential international events such as the Venice Biennale, Canadian Heritage's inaugural Creative Industries Trade Mission to China, a Trade Mission to Europe, among others.

Sandra Laronde's many awards and honours include the Governor General's Performing Arts Award, the Governor General of Canada's Meritorious Service Cross, the Order of Ontario, the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario Heritage Award for Excellence in Conservation, the Canada Council for the Arts Victor Martyn Lynch-Staunton Award for Outstanding Artist in Dance, the Indspire Award for the Arts, the Toronto Arts Foundation's Indigenous Artist Award, the Johanna Metcalf Performing Arts Prize, and an honorary doctorate from Trent University, among other recognitions

## RED SKY PERFORMANCE

Red Sky Performance is a global leader in contemporary Indigenous arts. They bring bold, inspiring, and transformative new works of dance, theatre, music, and multimedia to audiences across Canada and around the world.

Founded in 2000 by visionary Sandra Laronde, they are an Indigenous-led company. Red Sky Performance celebrates powerful storytelling and artistic innovation.

Acclaimed for groundbreaking collaborations, the company performed nearly 4,000 shows across 24 countries on four continents, driven by their mission to create inspiring experiences of contemporary Indigenous arts that bring meaningful transformation to society.

Red Sky is at home performing on world stages, national stages, and regularly perform in rural and reserve communities across Canada. Their world stages include two Cultural Olympiads (Beijing and Vancouver), World Expo Shanghai, Venice Biennale, and The Kennedy Center.

[www.redskyperformance.com](http://www.redskyperformance.com)



# PERFORMERS

*(Continued)*



## ELIOT BRITTON

### Composer

Eliot Britton (b.1983) - integrates electronic, audiovisual and instrumental music through an energetic and colourful personal language. His creative output reflects an eclectic musical experience, from gramophones to videogames, drum machines to orchestras. Rhythmic gadgetry, artistry and the colours of technology permeate his works. By drawing

on these sound worlds and others, Britton's compositions tap newly available resources of the 21st century. As a member of the Manitoba Metis Federation, Britton is passionate about Canadian musical culture, seeking new and engaging aesthetic directions that use technology to enhance expression.

Eliot Britton completed his Undergraduate Studies with Michael Matthews at the University of Manitoba and continued on to a MMus and PhD in music research and composition at the Schulich School of Music at McGill University under the supervision of Prof. Sean Ferguson. Here Britton has worked as a course lecturer, researcher and composer in residence for numerous ensembles. He is the recipient of numerous prizes, and research grants including SSHRC Bombardier graduate scholarships, Hugh Le Caine and Serge Garant awards and most recently a Canadian Foundation for Innovation award and a DORA for best composition and sound design.

Currently Britton is cross appointed between Music Technology & Digital Media and Composition at the University of Toronto Faculty of Music. There he is building a media research-creation facility (Centre BPMC) and renovating the historical UofT Electronic Music Studios (EMS). As co-director of Manitoba's Cluster New Music and Integrated Arts Festival and an independent music producer Britton continues to produce events and music in a variety of contexts.

## TREVOR WILSON

### Conductor

Trevor Wilson is a conductor and composer who from 2022–2025 held the position of RBC Resident Conductor of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and served as Music Director of the Toronto Symphony Youth Orchestra during the 2024/2025 season.

Trevor has also appeared as a guest conductor with orchestras across Canada, including the NAC Orchestra and Symphony Nova Scotia, and was recently appointed RBC Resident Conductor of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra.

Under the mentorship of Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Trevor was among the inaugural cohort of the Orchestre Métropolitain's Orchestral Conducting Academy, participating from 2021–2024. Also active in the musical community of his native Ottawa, Trevor has directed the University of Ottawa Orchestra and, in 2017, co-founded the Ottawa Pops Orchestra, having served as Music Director until 2019 and continuing to collaborate with the ensemble to the present day.

Having attended numerous masterclasses and festivals, Trevor has had the opportunity to study under internationally renowned conductors and pedagogues such as Alexander Shelley, David Zinman, Gerard Schwarz, Neil Varon, and served as assistant conductor of the National Academy Orchestra of Canada under the late Boris Brott in summer 2019. Trevor completed his graduate studies in orchestral conducting under Marin Alsop at the Peabody Conservatory.



# PERFORMERS

(Continued)

## TORONTO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

### Artistic Leadership

**Gustavo Gimeno**  
MUSIC DIRECTOR

**Sir Andrew Davis**  
CONDUCTOR LAUREATE  
(In Memoriam)

**Peter Oundjian**  
CONDUCTOR EMERITUS

**Steven Reineke**  
PRINCIPAL POPS  
CONDUCTOR

**Daniel Bartholomew-  
Poyser**  
BARRETT PRINCIPAL  
EDUCATION  
CONDUCTOR  
& COMMUNITY  
AMBASSADOR

**Nicholas Sharma**  
RBC RESIDENT  
CONDUCTOR  
& TSYO CONDUCTOR  
*generously supported by  
the Toronto Symphony  
Volunteer Committee*

**Emilie LeBel**  
COMPOSER ADVISOR

**Liam Ritz**  
RBC AFFILIATE  
COMPOSER

### Violins

**Jonathan Crow**  
CONCERTMASTER

*Tom Beck*  
*Concertmaster Chair*

**Matthew Hakkarainen**

**Clare Semes**  
ASSOCIATE  
CONCERTMASTERS

**Marc-André Savoie**

**Luri Lee**  
ASSOCIATE  
CONCERTMASTERS

**Eri Kosaka**  
PRINCIPAL,  
SECOND VIOLIN

**Kun Yan**  
ASSOCIATE PRINCIPAL,  
SECOND VIOLIN

**Atis Bankas**  
**Yolanda Bruno**  
**Christina (Jung Yun) Choi**<sup>°</sup>  
**Sydney Chun**<sup>°</sup>

**Amanda Goodburn**

**Bridget Hunt**

**Ah Young Kim**

**Shane Kim**<sup>°</sup>

**Douglas Kwon**

**Erica Miller**

**Sergei Nikonov**

**Peter Seminovs**

**Jennifer Thompson**

**Angelique Toews**

**James Wallenberg**

**Virginia Chen Wells**

### Violas

**Rémi Pelletier**  
PRINCIPAL

**Theresa Rudolph**  
ACTING ASSOCIATE  
PRINCIPAL

**Diane Leung**  
ACTING ASSISTANT  
PRINCIPAL

**Ashley Vandiver**<sup>\*</sup>

**Ivan Ivanovich**<sup>°</sup>

**Gary Labovitz**

**Hezekiah Leung**

**Mary Carol Nugent**

**Christopher Redfield**

**Evalynn Tyros**

### Cellos

**Joseph Johnson**  
PRINCIPAL

*Principal Cello Chair*

*Supported by*

*Dr. Armand Hammer*

**Emmanuelle Beaulieu  
Bergeron**

ASSOCIATE PRINCIPAL

**Winona Zelenka**

ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL

**Alastair Eng**<sup>°\*</sup>

**Igor Gefter**

**Roberta Janzen**

**Song Hee Lee**

**Oleksander Mycyk**

**Lucia Ticho**

### Double Basses

**Jeffrey Beecher**  
PRINCIPAL

**Michael Chiarello**

ASSOCIATE PRINCIPAL

Theodore Chan  
Jesse Dale  
Christopher Laven  
Mark Lillie

### Flutes

Kelly Zimba Lukić  
PRINCIPAL  
*Toronto Symphony  
Volunteer Committee  
Principal Flute Chair*

Kayla Burggraf  
ASSOCIATE PRINCIPAL  
Leonie Wall  
Camille Watts

### Piccolo

Camille Watts  
*Supported by Cathy Beck  
& Laurence Rubin*

### Oboes

Sarah Jeffrey<sup>°</sup>  
PRINCIPAL  
*Cathy & Liddy Beck  
Principal Oboe Chair*  
Evan Yonce  
ASSOCIATE PRINCIPAL  
Hugo Lee<sup>°</sup>

### English Horn

Cary Ebli

### Clarinets

Eric Abramovitz  
PRINCIPAL  
*Sheryl L. & David W. Kerr  
Principal Clarinet Chair*  
Zhenyu (Johnny) Wang  
ASSOCIATE PRINCIPAL  
Miles Haskins  
Joseph Orłowski

### Bass Clarinet

Miles Haskins

### Bassoons

Marlene Ngalissamy  
PRINCIPAL  
Nicolas Richard  
ASSOCIATE PRINCIPAL  
Samuel Banks  
Fraser Jackson

### Contrabassoon

Fraser Jackson

### Horns

Neil Deland  
PRINCIPAL  
*Toronto Symphony  
Volunteer Committee  
Principal Horn Chair*  
Christopher Gongos  
ASSOCIATE PRINCIPAL  
Audrey Good  
Nicholas Hartman  
Gabriel Radford<sup>°</sup>

### Trumpets

Steven Woomert<sup>°</sup>  
ASSOCIATE PRINCIPAL  
Renata Cardoso  
James Gardiner<sup>°</sup>

### Trombones

Gordon Wolfe  
PRINCIPAL  
Vanessa Fralick<sup>°</sup>  
ASSOCIATE PRINCIPAL

### Tuba

Mark Tetreault  
PRINCIPAL

### Timpani

David Kent  
PRINCIPAL  
Joseph Kelly  
ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL

### Percussion

Charles Settle  
PRINCIPAL  
Nicholas Matthiesen  
ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL  
Joseph Kelly

### Harp

Heidi Elise Bearcroft  
PRINCIPAL

### Guest Musicians

Sienna Cho  
VIOLIN  
Bora Kim  
VIOLIN  
Lance Ouellette  
VIOLIN  
Megan Hodge  
BASS TROMBONE  
Talisa Blackman  
KEYBOARD  
Andrew Harper  
LIBRARIAN  
Meaghan McCracken  
LIBRARIAN

### Librarian

Michael Macaulay  
PRINCIPAL

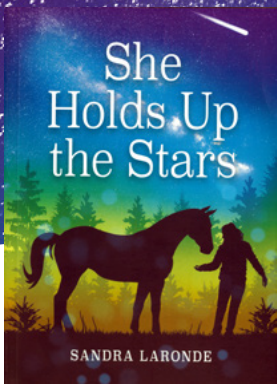
### Personnel

David Kent  
MANAGER

<sup>°</sup>Toronto Symphony  
Youth Orchestra alumni  
<sup>\*</sup>On leave  
<sup>\*\*</sup>On sabbatical

# FEEDBACK FORMS





# THANK YOU FOR JOINING US

## WE'D LOVE YOUR FEEDBACK

We will be emailing an online feedback form for you and your students after the concert. But, if you'd prefer to fill out a hardcopy, we have printable forms at the end of this guide.

You can return your printed forms to us by mail:

Toronto Symphony Orchestra  
500-145 Wellington St W, Toronto ON M5J 1H8

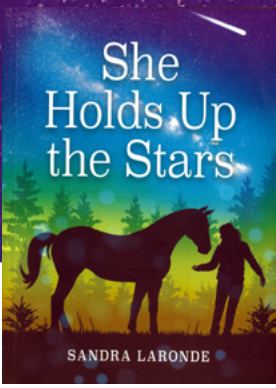
Or you can scan and email them to:

[schoolconcerts@TSO.CA](mailto:schoolconcerts@TSO.CA)

Thank you for sharing your feedback with us.

Until next time,

**The TSO E-team**



# STUDENT FEEDBACK

Date you attended: \_\_\_\_\_

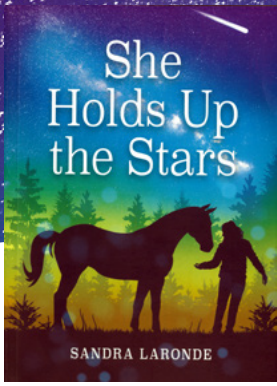
Name of school (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

1. What was your favourite part of the concert and why?

2. What was your least favourite part of the concert and why?

3. What you are curious to learn more about?

4. What music would you like to hear the TSO perform?



# TEACHER FEEDBACK FORM

Date you attended: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of school (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

1. How did you first hear about today's concert?
2. How long have you been attending our School Concerts?
  
3. What did you or your students like the most about the concert?
  
  
4. How could we improve our School Concerts and better help you meet curriculum expectations?
  
  
5. What topics, themes, or music would you like us to explore in next year's School Concerts?
  
  
6. If you could talk to the generous donors who subsidize the low-ticket prices of our education programs, what would you say about the importance of TSO Education programs?

# THANK YOU

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Toronto Symphony Orchestra gratefully acknowledges the following donors for their generous support. Together, they are enabling tens of thousands of young people to participate in TSO education programs this year.

- Barrett Family Foundation
- William Birchall Foundation
- The Boiler Inspection & Insurance Company of Canada
- Canada Life
- Crinoline Foundation
- Down Family Foundation
- Alex and Carolyn Drummond Foundation
- Phyllis & Ab Flatt Family Endowment
- Lauri & Jean Hiivala
- Keith Foundation
- Gurney M. Kranz Charitable Foundation
- Long & McQuade
- Norman and Margaret Jewison Foundation
- The Catherine and Maxwell Meighen Foundation
- Paul Selick Foundation
- Sleeman Breweries
- Thomas, Large & Singer
- Toronto Musicians' Association
- Toronto Symphony Volunteer Committee
- Thorpe Family Foundation
- Gert Wharton Endowment Fund
- Max and Beatrice Wolfe Foundation
- Marjorie and Joseph Wright Memorial Foundation

## BRAVO TO OUR PARTNERS



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Conseil des arts  
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Canada 

# Red Sky

TSO  Toronto  
Symphony  
Orchestra

