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—School Library Journal, ★ review

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# The Sockeye Mother

Hetxw'ms Gyetxw (Brett David Huson)

Natasha Donovan

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To the Gitksan people of Northwestern British Columbia, the sockeye salmon is more than just a source of food. Over its life cycle, it nourishes the very land and forests that the Skeena River runs through and where the Gitksan make their home. *The Sockeye Mother* explores how the animals, water, soil, and seasons are all intertwined.

A map of Gitksan territory is included at the back of the book.

A video pronunciation guide is available at [www.portageandmainpress.com/product/the-sockeye-mother](http://www.portageandmainpress.com/product/the-sockeye-mother)



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For Warren, Ruby & Jeri. My life, my loves, my heart.

— H.G. / B.D.H.

For my family

— N.D.

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# THE SOCKEYE MOTHER

By Hetxw'ms Gyetxw (Brett D. Huson)

Illustrated by Natasha Donovan

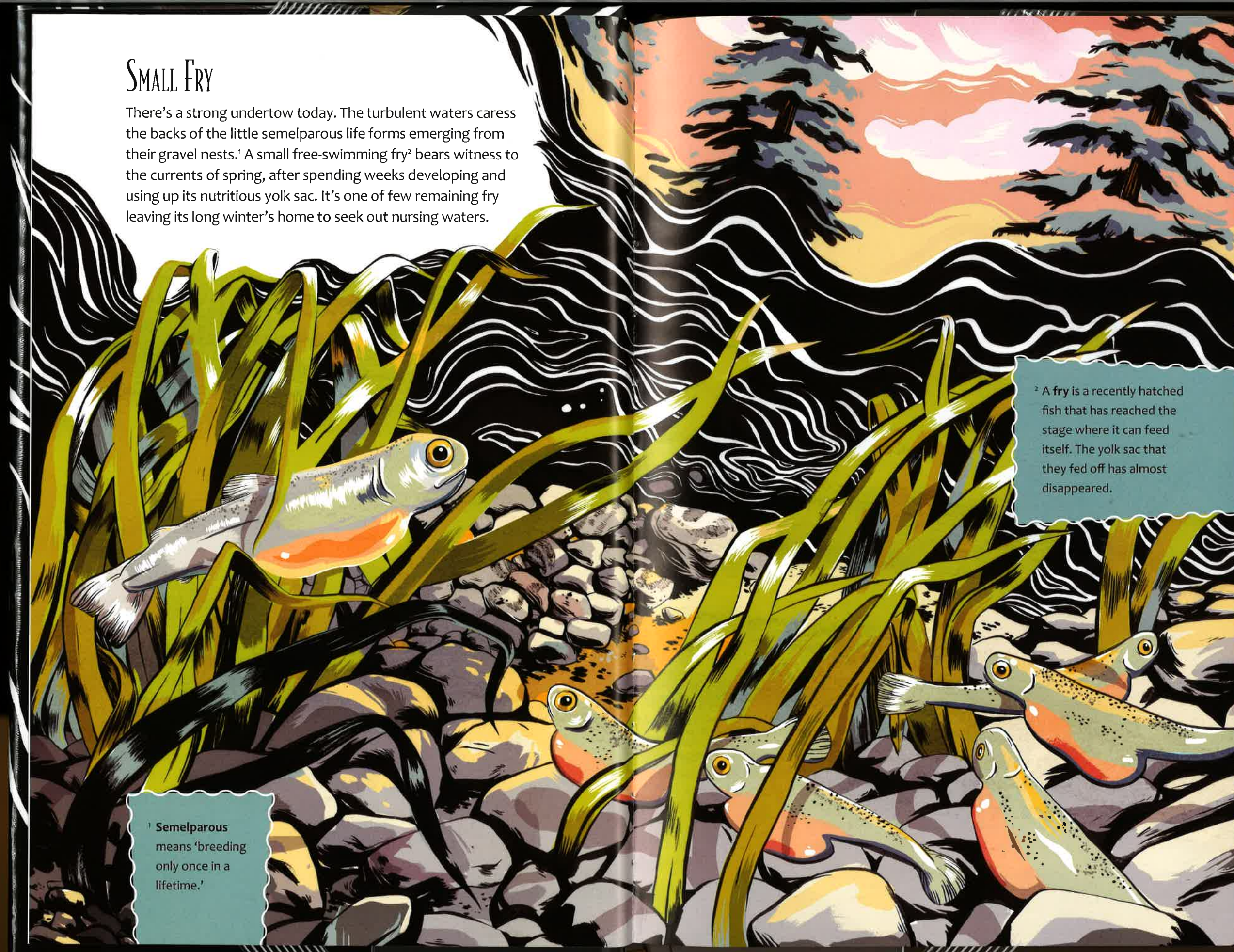
  
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## SMALL FRY

There's a strong undertow today. The turbulent waters caress the backs of the little semelparous life forms emerging from their gravel nests.<sup>1</sup> A small free-swimming fry<sup>2</sup> bears witness to the currents of spring, after spending weeks developing and using up its nutritious yolk sac. It's one of few remaining fry leaving its long winter's home to seek out nursing waters.


<sup>2</sup> A fry is a recently hatched fish that has reached the stage where it can feed itself. The yolk sac that they fed off has almost disappeared.

<sup>1</sup> Semelparous means 'breeding only once in a lifetime.'





This is the time of Wihlax (the Black Bear's Walking Moon), which is early spring to the Gitxsan people of the Pacific Northwest Interior. Change is in the air as the days grow longer. Renewal is the life force that guides the world around the little fry's waterways. All flora begin to stir, preparing to bud and bring green to the landscape. Stores of food for the people along Xsan (River of Mists) are running low, but preparations for the new seasons of fishing and gathering have begun. New snow, which the Gitxsan call dalugwa, falls to take away the old snow.



Miso'o, or sockeye, are one of many species of salmon that call Xsan home. Although all species are valued, the Gitksan prefer the flavour and number of sockeye that return to their spawning grounds every year. The cultures along Xsan, otherwise known as the Skeena River, flourish and shape their existence around the life cycle of this keystone species<sup>3</sup>. Little does this small sockeye fry know that its life cycle not only nourishes the people and other beings along the watersheds, it is the whole reason the forests and landscapes exist.

<sup>3</sup> A keystone species is a one on which other species in an ecosystem depend.

## TIME TO GROW

After a couple of years of schooling in the deeper parts of the nursing lake, this sockeye has become a smolt.<sup>4</sup> Its little silvery body begins taking the shape of its blue-backed future self. The smolt is outgrowing the lake. This signals Lasa ya'a (the Spring Salmon's Returning Moon), so the little sockeye begins its treacherous journey down the Skeena.



<sup>4</sup> A **smolt** is a young fish that is undergoing the changes needed to go from living in fresh water to living in salt water.



<sup>5</sup> Saliferous means  
'containing lots of salt.'

As the spring salmon return, the sockeye smolts depart to relieve their urge for saliferous waters.<sup>5</sup> April carries summer innuendos, as warm winds flow through nearly blooming flowers. The scent of pine and cedar wafts across moist, pillowy moss.



The nets and rods of the Gitksan people scour Xsan in hopes of taking part in the return of ya'a, the spring salmon. Ceremony is held and feasts occur to welcome the runs of salmon who come to replenish the land. It's not only a time to give thanks, but also a time to send prayer that the salmon will always return, that they will provide nourishment for all who are living within its realm.






The young sockeye has so far avoided predators, escaping the hungry hands of 'watxs – the otter – and dodging the unnaturally changing landscape, denuded by the clear-cutting of man. The smolt and her school have made their journey to the Pacific, and north to the ocean waters, where they will continue to feed and grow.



## A REPLENISHING DEATH


For two years the sockeye mother has been feeding in the ocean waters, while avoiding sharks and killer whales. Through instinct, smell, and much that is still not understood, the sockeye mother swims against the powerful currents of Xsan to return to the exact place in the rivers where she was spawned.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Spawned means 'released as eggs.'



It's now Lasa lik'i'nxsw (the Grizzly Bear's Moon). August is the time when all the Gitksan people and grizzly bears pluck hundreds of thousands of sockeye from Xsan. Many predators, such as the grizzly, discard most of the carcass. They carry their catch sometimes hundreds of metres into the forest, only to eat the eggs and fatty bellies. The decaying bodies of the salmon leave nitrogen that nourishes the soil.



Battered and beaten by the journey, the sockeye mother is literally decaying due to constant hard work and lack of food. She finds a male partner who has dug a nest to her liking. She lays her eggs. She can now die a replenishing death. The dying salmon bodies become fertilizer for all the flora that shape the great lands. Without the sockeye mother, the Gitksan, as they are, would simply not exist. 

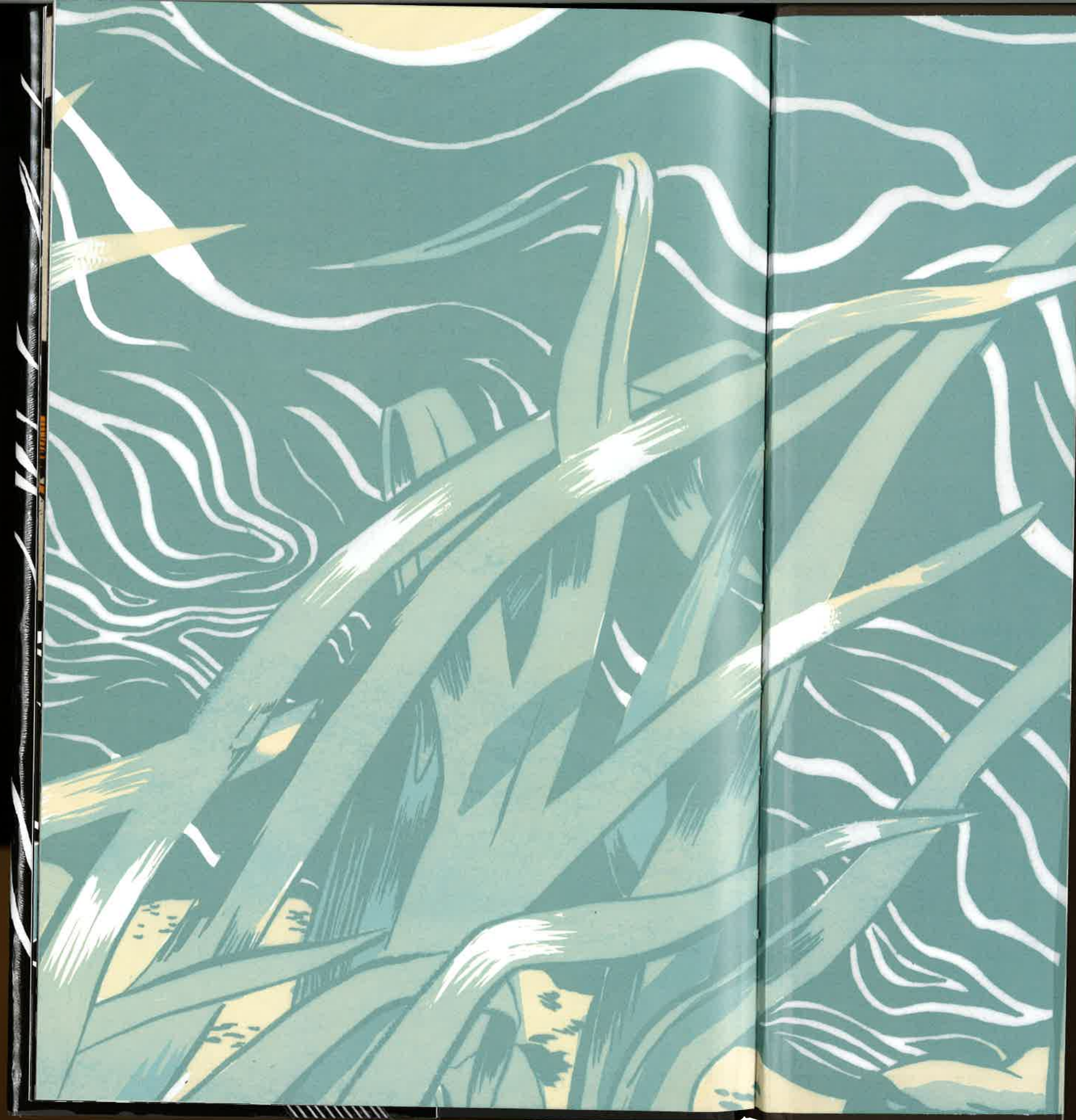
## THE GITXSAN

The Gitksan Nation are indigenous peoples from their unceded territories of the Northwest Interior of British Columbia, 35,000 square kilometres of land that cradles the headwaters of Xsan or "the River of Mist," also known by its colonial name the Skeena River. The land defines who they are.

The Nation follows a matrilineal line, and all rights, privileges, names, and stories come from the mothers. The fireweed, frog, eagle and wolf are the four clans of the people. It is taboo to marry a fellow clan member, even when there are no blood ties.

The four clans are divided among the territories by way of the Wilp system. A Wilp, or "house group," is a group comprising one or more families. Each has a head chief and wing chiefs, who are guided by the members and Elders within the Wilp. Currently, there are 62 house groups, and each governs their portion of the Gitksan Territories.





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hetxw'ms Gyetxw (Brett D. Huson) is from the Gitksan Nation, an Indigenous people from an unceded territory in the Northwest Interior of British Columbia, Canada. For the past decade, Brett has worked in the film and television industry, and has volunteered for such organizations as Ka Ni Kanichik and Indigenous Music Manitoba.

Growing up in a strong matrilineal society, Brett experienced and learned about the culture, land, and political landscape he was born into. From this came a passion to create and share the knowledge and stories of his people, which reflect the importance of environmental balance and a cultural knowledge that spans thousands of years.

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Natasha is a freelance artist and illustrator from Vancouver, British Columbia and is a member of the Métis Nation of British Columbia. She has a degree in anthropology from UBC and previously worked in publishing at the University of Victoria. Her sequential artwork appears in *This Place: 150 Years Retold* and *The Other Side* anthologies. *The Sqckeye Mother*, book one in the Mothers series, is her first time illustrating a children's book. Natasha lives in Bellingham, Washington with her partner, Sky, and their dog, Luna. @natashamdonovan

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