



# Voices from the Gaps

# Velma Wallis

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*Stories are gifts given by an elder to a younger person. Unfortunately, this gift is not given, nor received, as often today because many of our youth are occupied by television and the fast pace of modern-day living. Maybe tomorrow a few of today's generation who were sensitive enough to have listened to their elders' wisdom will have the traditional word-of-mouth stories living within their memory. Perhaps tomorrow's generation also will yearn for stories such as this so that they may better understand their past, their people, and, hopefully, themselves.*

— Two Old Women

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## Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1960
- \* Native American author
- \* Author of *Two Old Women* (1993)

## Biography

Velma Wallis is an Athabaskan Indian who was born in Fort Yukon, Alaska. This remote village of about 650 people is approximately 140 miles northeast of Fairbanks and a few miles north of the Arctic Circle. It is the largest village in the Yukon Flats and can be reached only by small airplane, dog sled, snow mobile or riverboat.

The Athabaskan Indians depend on seasonal employment and subsistence—living off the land by fishing, hunting, and trapping. Today the Gwich'in Athabaskans live in eastern Alaska and western Canada, along the Yukon, Porcupine and Tanana rivers.

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# Velma Wallis

## Biography continued

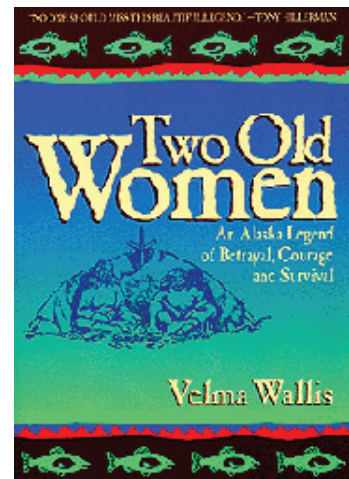
Wallis was one of 13 children. When she was 13, her father died and she left school to help her mother raise her younger siblings. Years later she moved to her father's trapping cabin, a twelve-mile walk from the village, and learned traditional survival skills of hunting and trapping. An avid reader, she passed her high school equivalency exam and began her first literary project-- writing down a legend her mother had told her, about two abandoned old women and their struggle to survive.

The first story, *Two Old Women*, was published by Epicenter press in 1993. This work has won a Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award and a Western States Book Award. With more than 250,000 copies in print and translation into sixteen languages, it has been optioned by Fox Searchlight Pictures for a major feature film. *Two Old Women* has been highly praised by readers and critics from around the world.

Following in the path of her first book, Wallis's second book, *Bird Girl and the Man who Followed the Sun*, is getting noticed throughout the United States and the world. So far more than 20,000 copies of this book have been sold since its release by Epicenter Press in October 1996. Translation rights have already been purchased for six languages and Harper Collins of New York immediately bought paperback rights.

This story connects two ancient legends told to Wallis by her mother, each about a young Native rebel. One is an independent woman who defies her culture's expectations by refusing to become a traditional wife and mother. Choosing to brave life on her own as a hunter, she risks her own survival. The other legend is about a young man who journeys from his homeland to search for the legendary "Land of the Sun." Both characters must in the end find a way to come back to their land, people, and traditions they had left.

Wallis is married to Jeffrey John and they have two children. The family enjoys spending time in the neighboring village of Venetie.





# Velma Wallis

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