

Louise Erdrich: Worlds within worlds

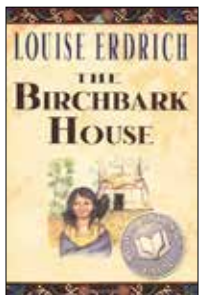
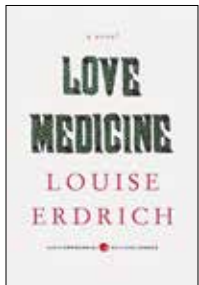
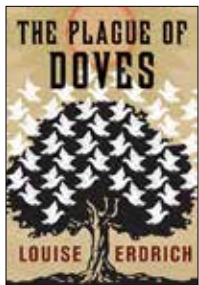


OWEN WISTER AWARD

Named after Owen Wister, author of *The Virginian* and considered the “father” of the Western story, the Owen Wister Award is presented to a living author for lifetime achievement in Western history and literature. The recipient is automatically inducted into the Western Writers Hall of Fame.

By Nancy Plain

“As the malling of America continues, it is our mission to be *other*.”



This is the motto of Birchbark House, a small independent bookstore in the historic district of Minneapolis. If you visit, you’ll find treasures. Books – many focusing on American Indian culture – pack the shelves, peek from drawers, and fan out on tables. Keeping them company are American Indian artwork and handicrafts – jewelry, baskets, a miniature birchbark house, rows of birdhouses and more. A canoe hangs suspended from the ceiling, and a birch-log bannister leads to a cozy loft for reading. Amid literature-loving dogs and a welcoming staff, you might meet the store’s proprietor.

If she recommends a book to you, take her advice. For she is the bestselling author Louise Erdrich, one of the most highly acclaimed writers working in America today. Among her masterpieces are *The Round House*, winner of the National Book Award for Fiction; *The Plague of Doves*, winner of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award and finalist for the Pulitzer Prize; and *Love Medicine*, published in 1984 and the only debut novel ever to receive the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her most recent novel, the haunting *LaRose*, might go down as one of her greatest works. In addition to 15 novels, Erdrich has written poetry, short stories, a memoir of early motherhood and seven children’s books, one of which, *The Birchbark House*, was a finalist for the National Book Award.

Erdrich is the 2017 recipient of WWA’s highest literary honor, the Owen Wister Award, celebrating a lifetime of outstanding contributions to Western literature.

Erdrich’s literary territory, a fictional

North Dakota Ojibwe reservation, has been compared to William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County in its rich particularity and panoply of unforgettable characters. Because these characters are often related by history and blood, they inhabit successive Erdrich novels. (Helpfully, the books include family trees.) As American Indians, Erdrich’s people straddle two worlds: the white and the Indian. They deal with, as one of her characters puts it, “the gut kick of [their] history.” The past is always present in the form of maddening conflicts between tribal law and U.S. law, in the interplay between tribal spirituality and Catholicism, in the elders’ stories as they illuminate life in the old times and the modern day. Herself an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of the Ojibwe, Erdrich looks deep into Ojibwe identity and gives us worlds within worlds.

The eldest of seven children, Erdrich was born in Little Falls, Minnesota, in 1954, to a German-American father and a mother who is half-French and half-Ojibwe (also known as Chippewa). Early in Erdrich’s life, her family moved to Wahpeton, North Dakota, where her parents taught at a boarding school run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Erdrich has said, “My father was my biggest literary influence”; he gave her a nickel every time she wrote a story. With parents who loved books and prized storytelling and letter writing over television, not only Louise, but two of her sisters would grow up to become writers. Nowadays, the sisters hold writing workshops on the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation, in North Dakota.

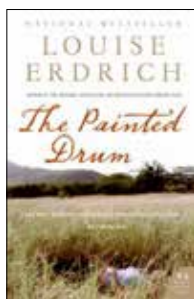
The first plane ride Erdrich ever took was to attend Dart-



Louise Erdrich Courtesy of Paul Emmel

mouth College as a member of the first class to admit women and as a participant in the inaugural year of the college's Native American Studies Program. In 2009, back at Dartmouth to receive an honorary doctorate and to give the commencement address, she recalled that she had been terrified to enter this new geography, this new life. "I was sure anyway, coming from North Dakota, that everyone was smarter than me." It took time for her anxiety to recede. The lesson learned? "Most of the time, once you analyze your fear it can be managed. Unless you are in a life or death situation, your main fear is probably failure, or possible humiliation." And "if there's one thing we all have in common, it is absurd humiliation, which can actually become the basis of wisdom."

Although she started out as a poet, she soon found herself pulled toward prose. But she was used to roaming around or sitting up and lying down at will when working on poetry, so when she attempted her first novel, she "literally could not sit still." She solved that early problem by tying herself with scarves into her chair. The result was *Love Medicine*, published in 1984 at about the same time as *Jacklight*, her first collection



In her own words

"Life will break you. Nobody can protect you from that, and living alone won't either, for solitude will also break you with its yearning. You have to love. You have to feel. It is the reason you are here on earth. You are here to risk your heart."

– *The Painted Drum*

of poems.

In 2012, when she accepted the National Book Award for *The Round House*, Erdrich told the audience, "I wouldn't be here if it weren't for my daughters." Her six children have enriched her life to the point where she says, "having children has also made me this particular writer. Without my children, I'd have written with less fervor; I wouldn't understand life in the same way." Each of her daughters has worked in the bookstore, and she values their opinions on her own work.

WWA talks about Erdrich



"In book after book over the past several decades, Louise Erdrich has painstakingly crafted a world unique in the annals of American fiction. At once strongly

rooted in a specific place and culture yet universal in their resonance, her eloquently written family sagas render the Native American experience in all its wonderful complexities. As a writer who can lay bare the landscape of the human heart, she has few peers."

– Kirk Ellis, WWA president



"Louise Erdrich's work exemplifies that grand combination of characters who touch the heart and ideas that leave the reader with something to chew on long after the

story ends. She is prolific and profound, the creator of a terrific collection of highly original novels, poetry, works for children, and more. Her lyric prose celebrates both her Chippewa heritage and her passionate embrace of the universal commonalities and the perennial questions that trouble and inspire thoughtful humans."

– Anne Hillerman, Spur Award winner



"Louise Erdrich's stories are rich in metaphor. In *Love Medicine*, for instance, Grandfather's '... thoughts swam between us, hidden under rocks, disappearing in weeds....' Her imagery is vivid: 'Her clothes were filled with safety pins and hidden tears.' The emotions are powerful: 'Veils of love which was only hate petrified by longing.' And her stories are spiced with a wry philosophy: 'The richest plan is not to have one.'"

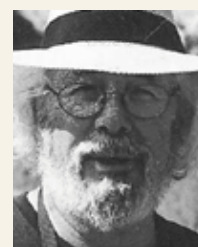
– Lucia St. Clair Robson, Owen Wister Award recipient



"On the basis of what's available, the casual reader might be excused for assuming that the American Indian experience ended with the frontier. Reservation thrillers aside, the Native American might be a museum piece but for Louise Erdrich, who through her heritage and narrative power has made a place for her people in postmodern literature. *Four Souls*, to cite one example, seizes the tattered concept of the revenge story and turns it upside-down, with twists solidly

rooted in character. Her prose is electric and her revolving cast indelible."

– Loren D. Estleman, Owen Wister Award recipient



"Louise Erdrich is a brilliant prose stylist and daring in her excursions into new ways of telling stories. By bringing an entirely new perspective to seeing the West and its people, she

has opened new horizons in the literature of the West. In honoring her, WWA honors itself and becomes more inclusive."

– Win Blevins, Owen Wister Award recipient



"There's a workshop I present on writing effective opening lines. One of my best examples is from Louise Erdrich's novel *Tracks*: 'We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall.' Her books – and I have read most of them – are filled with such lines. While the stories she tells are powerful, for my money the language she uses to tell them is what sets her apart."

– Rod Miller, Spur Award winner

In another role that embraces family ties, a sister and she operate a small nonprofit publishing company called Wiig-waas Press. And in what is surely a world-class juggling act, Erdrich manages to capture the time and solitude she needs to write. Some of it she grabs while driving, and she has been known to pull over to the side of the highway to jot down an idea or a scrap of dialogue. She sometimes feels impelled to rewrite past books, too, and has republished some of them in editions that better conform to her current outlook.

Erdrich's use of language is extraordinary; she is a master of the unexpected phrase that startles the reader with its perfection: "heartbreak mitigation," "angry neatness," "the phosphorus of grief." She can be wildly funny, too, writing ribald, laugh-out-loud conversations among the elders at the old-age home; or crafting a comical scene in which teenage boys pretend to be converted into the reservation's youthful "God Squad." Her work is imbued with the inseparable bond between humans and nature. She understands the soul connection between people and animals and describes with clarity the suffering of both. In *The Painted Drum*, a suicidal old man speaks to a wolf and receives wisdom: "Wolf, I said, your people are hunted from the air and poisoned from the earth and killed on sight and you are outbred and stuffed in cages and almost wiped out. How is it that you go on living with such sorrow? How do you go on without turning around and destroying yourselves, as so many of us Anishinaabeg [Ojibwe] have done under similar circumstances?"

"And the wolf answers not in words, but with a continuation of that stare. We live because we live. He did not ask questions. He did not give reasons. And I understood him then. The wolves accept the life they are given."

Erdrich is sometimes asked whether an aspect of her work can be categorized as magical realism – in *The Painted Drum*, for instance, a tribal drum beats of its own accord, guiding people and saving lives. But the author rejects that label, observing that the experiences of many Native people she knows are mystifying and strange enough to make the notion of magical realism seem "ho-hum."

Erdrich's magnificent body of work encompasses rock-bottom realities and plumbs the depths of sorrow, but it also tenaciously upholds courage and endurance and redemption and love. And in her uncanny ability to look into the human heart, she achieves the universal.

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An Erdrich Sampler

The Birchbark House

The first of five in the *Birchbark* children's series, this novel immerses the reader in the Ojibwe (*Anishinaabeg*) world of the mid-19th Century, as seen through the eyes of a girl named Omakayas (Little Frog). At home on an island in Lake Superior, Omakayas tends her baby brother, hauls water, weaves mats, and more. In summer, her family lives in a birchbark house and in winter, a log cabin. In the wintertime, too, come grandmother's stories of the spirits and of how the earth began. Life progresses as expected, except for the increasing numbers of whites coming to settle nearby. Some in the tribe talk of moving farther west. But, warns one man, the whites will not stop "until they have it all, all of our lands. . . . Not even when we are gone and they have the bones of our loved ones will they be pleased." *The Birchbark House*, appealing to adults as well as children, can be understood as the missing half to the sagas of Laura Ingalls Wilder because it tells the story of America's westward expansion through the eyes of American Indians.

The Round House

The plot of *The Round House* hinges on the Indians' near-futile struggle for justice in America. United States law prohibits American Indians from prosecuting non-Indians who commit crimes on reservation land. So when Geraldine Coutts, wife of the tribal judge Antone Coutts and mother of 13-year-old Joe, is savagely beaten and raped, justice seems out of reach, fatally entangled within jurisdictional conflicts between tribal and federal law.

In the aftermath of the crime, the Coutts family disintegrates emotionally. When a legal technicality allows the perpetrator to walk free, young Joe takes matters into his own hands. Erdrich's portrayal of her characters is pitch perfect, from that of Joe and his buddies to his grandfather, Mooshum. Mooshum tells Joe stories of the "grandeur and power" of the old days and of the origins of the sacred tribal Round House. One of Erdrich's most beloved works, this is a powerful statement on injustice and violence and on love and the daring of youth.

LaRose

The action in *LaRose* shifts between the Ojibwe reservation and the small town outside its boundary. The book opens with an unspeakable tragedy as Landreaux Iron kills his friend Peter Ravich's son in a hunting accident. Following ancient tribal tradition, Landreaux and his wife, Emmaline, try to balance this loss by giving their own son, LaRose, to the Ravich family. Erdrich explores the inner lives of the members of both grieving families. We hear also the voices of others in the community, troubled by their own demons.

The boy LaRose is the most recent in a long line of family members possessing healing powers. For him, the past and its stories are still alive. His ancestors, the "old people. . . [and] the spirits that lived in everything," visit him to teach and comfort him in his loneliness. This is a profound exploration of how life unfolds after the worst happens, and it is a masterpiece.