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Book Club Guide

Future Home of the Living God

By Louise Erdrich

About the Author

Karen Louise Erdrich is an American author of novels, poetry, and children's books. Her father is German American and mother is half Ojibwe and half French American. She is an enrolled member of the Anishinaabe nation (also known as Chippewa). She is widely acclaimed as one of the most significant Native writers of the second wave of what critic Kenneth Lincoln has called the Native American Renaissance.[1]

Louise Erdrich, a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, is the author of many novels as well as volumes of poetry, children's books, and a memoir of early motherhood. Her novel *The Round House* won the National Book Award for Fiction. *Love Medicine* and *LaRose* received the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction. Erdrich lives in Minnesota with her daughters and is the owner of Birchbark Books, a small independent bookstore. Her most recent book, *The Night Watchman,* won the Pulitzer Prize. A ghost lives in her creaky old house.[2]

[1] Retrieved from: https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/34217599-future-home-of-the-living-god

[2] Retrieved from: https://www.harpercollins.com/blogs/authors/louise-erdrich

About the Book

Louise Erdrich paints a startling portrait of a young woman fighting for her life and her unborn child against oppressive forces that manifest in the wake of a cataclysmic event in this dystopian novel. Twenty-six-year-old Cedar Hawk Songmaker, adopted daughter of a pair of Minneapolis liberals, is as disturbed and uncertain as the rest of America around her. But for Cedar, this change is profound and deeply personal. She is four months pregnant.

Though she wants to tell the adoptive parents who raised her from infancy, Cedar first feels compelled to find her birth mother, Mary Potts, an Ojibwe to understand both her and her baby's origins. As Cedar goes back to her own biological beginnings, society around her begins to disintegrate, fueled by a swelling panic about the end of humanity.

Retrieved from: https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/34217599-future-home-of-the-living-god

Discussion Questions

1. How did you experience the book? Were you engaged immediately, or did it take you a while to "get into it"? How did you feel reading it—amused, sad, disturbed, confused, bored...?

2. Describe the main characters—personality traits, motivations, and inner qualities.
    - Why do characters do what they do?
    - Are their actions justified?
    - Describe the dynamics between characters (in a marriage, family, or friendship).
    - How has the past shaped their lives?
    - Do you admire or disapprove of them?
    - Do they remind you of people you know?

3. Are the main characters dynamic—changing or maturing by the end of the book? Do they learn about themselves, how the world works and their role in it?

4. Discuss the plot:
    - Is it engaging—do you find the story interesting?
    - Is this a plot-driven book—a fast-paced page-turner?
    - Does the plot unfold slowly with a focus on character?
    - Were you surprised by complications, twists & turns?
    - Did you find the plot predictable, even formulaic?

5. Talk about the book's structure.
    - Is it a continuous story...or interlocking short stories?
    - Does the time-line move forward chronologically?
    - Does time shift back & forth from past to present?
    - Is there a single viewpoint or shifting viewpoints?
    - Why might the author have chosen to tell the story the way he or she did?
    - What difference does the structure make in the way you read or understand the book?

6. What main ideas—themes—does the author explore? (Consider the title, often a clue to a theme.) Does the author use symbols to reinforce the main ideas?

7. What passages strike you as insightful, even profound? Perhaps a bit of dialog that's funny or poignant or that encapsulates a character? Maybe there's a particular comment that states the book's thematic concerns?

8. Is the ending satisfying? If so, why? If not, why not...and how would you change it?

9. If you could ask the author a question, what would you ask? Have you read other books by the same author? If so how does this book compare. If not, does this book inspire you to read others?

10. Has this novel changed you—broadened your perspective? Have you learned something new or been exposed to different ideas about people or a certain part of the world?

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Author Interview

Louise Erdrich On Her Personal Connection To Native Peoples' 'Fight For Survival'

Erdrich's new novel, *The Night Watchman*, was inspired by her grandfather, who chaired the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa and fought a Congressional initiative to move native people off their land.

DAVE DAVIES, HOST:

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Dave Davies in for Terry Gross. Our guest today is author Louise Erdrich. In a career going back to the 1970s, she's published 17 novels and more than 30 books in all, including children's literature, poetry and nonfiction. She won the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction twice.

Erdrich is a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians, and much of her writing is centered on the experience of Native Americans. Her new novel is set in 1953 and is inspired by her grandfather's role in resisting a congressional effort to withdraw federal recognition from her family's tribe. The book is called "The Night Watchman."

Well, Louise Erdrich, welcome back to FRESH AIR. It's been a while.

LOUISE ERDRICH: Thank you.

DAVIES: You know, you say in the acknowledgments to this novel that you tried to write several books before getting underway on this one, and that your impetus had disintegrated. You kind of weren't getting anywhere, which is kind of a shock to me considering how prolific you have been. What shook you loose and got you started on this book?

ERDRICH: I went back to reading my grandfather's letters, which were written during the year I was born, 1954. So, of course, those years are somewhat mysterious to me. And I knew that he had fought termination during that time, but I never put together his letters and the details of what it was like for him to work as a night watchman. I'd never put that together with the timeline for the termination bill and what effect it had on the first five tribes slated to be terminated.

DAVIES: A lot of this story is about this effort, which your grandfather led and which the main character in your book, Thomas, leads, which was this effort to oppose an initiative in the United States Congress to, effectively, kind of terminate the existence of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, which he was chairman of. You want to just explain what this proposal was, what its impact would have been?

ERDRICH: Termination was a way to finally resolve the - what Congress thought of as the Indian problem, and that would be to move everyone off reservation land because it wouldn't be reservation land anymore, turn over their land, sell their land, move everyone to cities. And the most important part in doing that was to abrogate all treaties. And these treaties had been made since the beginning of our country on a nation-to-nation basis with every tribe. And they all contain these words, as long as the grass grows, as long as the rivers flow.

So the original intent and purpose was to guarantee the land that was agreed upon by the two parties, the two nations. Those were thrown out the window by both houses of Congress and to simply declare the existence of Indians or Native American or American Indians a non-issue and to not recognize tribal nations. So...

DAVIES: And to terminate all federal assistance to the tribal lands.

ERDRICH: To terminate all federal...

DAVIES: Right.

ERDRICH: To terminate all federal assistance and all federal recognition of who Native - Indigenous people are and were. The reason for termination was not just to get rid of the problem that they - the Indian problem but to acquire the lands that, in many cases, were covered with some of the most beautiful stands of virgin forest in the country. So the first tribes slated for termination were the Menominee and the Klamath. And the intent, because of the post-war housing boom, was to get those big stands of timber, which they did.

DAVIES: And we should note that the resolution couched this as the emancipation of the tribes, right?

ERDRICH: Yeah, so that was the thing that was so hard to grasp. I mean, people had come out of government boarding school learning some English. For instance, my grandfather, who wrote letters, which I found later at the Plains' archives - wrote letters to get into boarding school - only finished the eighth grade. And he was tribal chairman at the time. And he had to assemble a delegation and go up against Congress within a matter of months in order to try and save his tribe from termination, which meant all the land would be lost because that would be all they would have to sell.

DAVIES: Right. This was a remarkable part - the story is fictional, but this part of it is true. (Laughter) I mean...

ERDRICH: It's absolutely true.

DAVIES: This man with an eighth grade education assembled this group and wrote letters. And - yeah.

ERDRICH: It couldn't be more true. That's what started it. I couldn't believe knowing what he went through as the night watchman - trying to stay awake all night and, by day, writing letters, going to meetings, traveling around the state of North Dakota wherever he could, doing whatever he could to assemble a delegation. I couldn't believe what his life was like. He said he had 12 hours of sleep most weeks.

DAVIES: Wow. You know, for those of you who don't know your story as well, tell us just a bit about your own background and your connection to this - the Turtle Mountain Band of the Chippewa.

ERDRICH: I will. So my mother is Turtle Mountain Chippewa, as was my grandfather, and so am I. I am an enrolled member, a citizen of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. It would be impossible for me to say that if termination had, indeed, won the day. So my father is German. I'm a very mixed person. And yet, being a citizen of a nation within our nation gives one a certain sense of - it changes your life. It means that I care deeply about my people, my mother's people. And I grew up knowing who I was and accepting all parts of myself. And this is a part that I realized would not have existed had my grandfather not fought for it.

DAVIES: Did you grow up speaking - is it Ojibwe, the language that the Chippewa speak?

ERDRICH: It's Ojibwemowin or Anishinaabemowin or, at the time that my grandfather was speaking it, just plain Chippewa. I didn't grow up - he was the last fluent speaker in the family. And I am very proud to say my daughter is the next fluent speaker...

DAVIES: Wow.

ERDRICH: ...Because she is teaching at an Ojibwe immersion school - Waadookodaading in Wisconsin on the Lac Courte Oreilles reservation.

DAVIES: And are Chippewa and Ojibwe synonymous? Are they different terms for the same thing?

ERDRICH: Yes. They're all versions of the original word, Anishinaabe.

ERDRICH: You grew up in Minnesota - is that right? - not on a reservation, right?

ERDRICH: No, I grew up in Wahpeton, N.D.

DAVIES: OK. I'm sorry.

ERDRICH: But that's not - that's on the border of the Sisseton Dakota reservation. It used to be within the borders. But I didn't grow up on the Turtle Mountain reservation. I was a visiting grandchild.

DAVIES: And your - but did your parents both teach in Bureau of Indian Affairs schools? Do I have this right?

ERDRICH: They did. My mother and my father taught at the same school that my grandfather attended...

DAVIES: Wow.

ERDRICH: ...A boarding school in Wahpeton.

DAVIES: You know, that brings us to a reading I'd like you to share with us. This is a bit of history, and I guess it talks about sort of - well, maybe you can set this up. This is about when your grandfather ended up going away to school. You want to just set this up and give us this reading from your book?

ERDRICH: Sure. Before my grandfather went to the Wahpeton boarding school, he went to a school that was somewhat closer - Fort Totten. It's known as Spirit Lake now. And in that time, one thing for sure was that every classroom was decorated with flags. Flags were everywhere. This had been a former military fort turned into a boarding school for children, so it was still run, in his time, as a military school.

And this is about when he leaves for school, and this was a very common experience for children who left - it was known that they would have to have their heads shaved, their hair cut. And that was one of the things that was most difficult for children and for their parents because their hair was personal. And in many cases - or many tribes, many families, allowing your hair to grow long was a symbol of your long life. Cutting your hair is a symbol of grief. So for that to happen was always very disturbing for the family.

(Reading) That year, his father was gaunt. His cheekbones jutting out. Thomas was always hungry. They were down to desperation food then, a bit of bannock speared with deer fat. The day schools on the reservation gave out just one meal. The government boarding school would feed three meals. Fort Totten Boarding School was a day's wagon ride if you started well before dawn. Thomas's mother, Julia (ph), or Awan (ph), wept and hid her face as he went away. She had been torn - whether to cut his hair herself. They would cut his hair off at the school. And to cut hair meant someone had died; it was a way of grieving. Just before they left, she took a knife to his braid. She would hang it in the woods so the government would not be able to keep him, so that he would come home. And he had come home.

DAVIES: And that is our guest Louise Erdrich reading from her new novel, "The Night Watchman." You know, what's striking about this is that people often send their kids away to school for opportunity. The impetus here was, really, starvation.

ERDRICH: The impetus was starvation. And the reasoning behind the best schools being far away was to assimilate native children, to train them to live in a culture that was very different from their parents. So that when they came home, often children couldn't speak the language that their parents were speaking. I have to say right here that boarding schools are often characterized in sort of a lump definition, but they were all very different. And the government had secular boarding schools which underwent a real sea change in the 1930s and became much more supportive of native culture, while many of the boarding schools which were run by religious groups did not and remained hostile to native religion and native culture.

DAVIES: Louise Erdrich is our guest. Her new novel is "The Night Watchman." We'll continue our conversation in just a moment. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

DAVIES: This is FRESH AIR. And we're speaking with writer Louise Erdrich. She has a new novel, "The Night Watchman."

You know, it's interesting. When Thomas, the character in this book, does as your grandfather did and write a lot of letters to local and state and national elected officials and eventually organize a group to go to Washington to testify in Congress against this so-called emancipation bill, one of the chief backers of the bill was a senator from Utah, Arthur Watkins. You want to just tell us a bit about him and his role in all this?

ERDRICH: Arthur V. Watkins grew up on Indian land. His family had settled on a piece of property that had been tax-forfeited. So that was another way of dispossessing Indians. It was the allotment era, when native people could get their citizenship if they accepted 160 acres for a man - sorry, women got only 80 acres. So if you accepted your allotment, often then you got citizenship. But it was a way of saying, well, all of the members now have these parcels; let's sell off the rest of the land. Or, you know, at the time, the extraordinary poverty that people lived with caused them to sell their land. There were ads in all the newspapers of the time advertising Indian land, cheap.

And that's what happened, but that wasn't enough. Arthur Watkins would withhold moneys. He did everything to coerce the Menominee and the Ute people to relinquish their lands. A lot of the time, native people did not really understand what they were being forced to sign. This goes way back. But this was something that can really be documented. They didn't understand that - because they spoke their languages, they spoke their native languages, many of them didn't understand what he was saying, what they were signing, only understood that, like, with - as with a treaty, that they would receive moneys if they sign. But these moneys were supposed to go to the tribes anyway; it was that he held them up.

DAVIES: And so he...

ERDRICH: So there was all sorts of ways to coerce people into allowing their lands to be terminated.

DAVIES: So a lot of his prosperity and career were built upon, essentially, the dispossession of Native Americans.

ERDRICH: Oh, completely.

DAVIES: Yeah. Yeah. He in the story, he questions Thomas, the character in the book, and I'm sure he questioned your grandfather about this. And one of the questions he asked almost everybody, according to the story, is just how much Indian blood is in you. And this was something that the people from the Turtle Mountain Band found puzzling - right? - because there - it's, in some respects, a hybrid of many cultures, right? And people identify as they identify.

ERDRICH: This is something that really - it really surprised me in reading back and doing the research. When people - he always questioned the native person he was talking to, and most often, the native person could not really reply or gave some sort of long story trying to figure it out on the spot. And that's because everyone knew who was native, who was Indian, who wasn't, and it wasn't something that native people took on as some sort of identity. And now everybody knows down to the fraction how much, quote-unquote, "Indian blood" they have.

DAVIES: You know, there's a moment in the story here where this group from the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa go to Washington to testify in Congress against this proposal to essentially terminate the tribe. And they patiently and respectfully answer all of the questions about, you know, what's happening in the tribe, the real state of their own economy and poverty.

ERDRICH: Yes.

DAVIES: And then afterward, Thomas, the guy that your - is inspired by your grandfather, actually goes to the office of Senator Arthur V. Watkins, the prime sponsor of this effort, and has a personal encounter. And he said he wanted to thank the senator for the opportunity to speak to Congress and for the senator's attention at the hearing. Do you know if this actually happened?

ERDRICH: This was real. There's a number of things that really happened in the book, but this was absolutely real. And I found a tiny P.S. on a letter to my parents on an onionskin copy - you know, those carbon copies - where he decided to write what actually happened afterward. And he said he'd gone down to thank Arthur V Watkins. And thought that was so like him. My grandfather was extremely polite. That was one thing he - and he didn't hold anyone's attitude toward him against them. He'd found that making friends was the most important skill in this process and keeping friends and meeting people on a very neutral, polite basis. And that's what he did.

DAVIES: Right. And who knows, but that might have been important in the outcome, which was that this proposal didn't happen.

ERDRICH: I know. I don't know. They also were able to assemble a very persuasive set of objections. That was very important. And to do it in just a few months was incredible. I mean, this was enacted immediately. And nobody had copy machines. Everything had to be retyped. They couldn't even find a copy of the bill. And they raised money themselves. They had a boxing match to raise money for them to go to Washington because they couldn't take money from the BIA. They had no money to go anywhere.

DAVIES: Right.

ERDRICH: You know, it wasn't - they didn't have any control. This was the nadir of their own influence over their sovereignty. They had no sovereignty. They had to answer to the Bureau of Indian Affairs at every turn. And although this isn't in the book, I might just add that Dillon S. Myer, who had overseen the incarceration of the Japanese during the '40s, was now the commissioner of American Indian Affairs in Washington. So he was now overseeing termination.

DAVIES: Wow.

Louise Erdrich is our guest. Her new novel is "The Night Watchman." We'll talk more after a break. And later, John Powers reviews the genre-busting Brazilian film "Bacurau," which won the Jury Prize at Cannes last year. I'm Dave Davies, and this is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF PETROS KLAMPANIS' "EASY COME EASY GO")

DAVIES: This is FRESH AIR. I'm Dave Davies, in for Terry Gross, who's off this week. We're speaking with author Louise Erdrich, who's published 17 novels, many centered on the experience of Native Americans. Her new novel, set in 1953, is inspired by her grandfather's role in resisting a congressional effort to withdraw federal recognition from her family's tribe. The book is called "The Night Watchman."

There's another character here who's sort of a - who drives a whole part of the plot, Patrice Paranteau (ph). Do I have that name right?

ERDRICH: Well, you do, but it would be called Paranteau.

DAVIES: Paranteau, OK.

(LAUGHTER)

ERDRICH: It would be pronounced pronto (ph), but it's Paranteau.

DAVIES: So tell us about Patrice and her family.

ERDRICH: Patrice has one of the much-coveted jobs at the jewel bearing plant. And that's where a lot of women worked at the time.

DAVIES: And we should just explain...

ERDRICH: Yes.

DAVIES: Jewel bearing means you're making these tiny, little bearings for watches and other machines made out of jewels.

ERDRICH: Yes.

DAVIES: It's - right. Technical stuff. They're not...

ERDRICH: They're tiny little toruses, yeah.

DAVIES: Right. We're not talking about jewelry here (laughter).

ERDRICH: No, no, it's - they're bearings for watches and gun sights. And I knew I had Patrice as a character when I wrote the line, she did things perfectly when enraged. She is supporting her mother, her brother. And she has this great job. She's incredibly proud of her job at the jewel bearing plant. Many women were hired there because they'd tested very highly on manual dexterity tests. And she knows that if she makes one false move, if she gets sick, if she doesn't make it to the job on time, she could get fired. So she's always living on this edge. And when something comes to throw her off, the stakes are very high.

DAVIES: You know, one thing that I was really impressed about in the way the story unfolds is that the poverty of the Paranteau family is something we become aware of gradually. I mean, do you want to just describe the circumstances they live in?

ERDRICH: They live in what was very common at the time, which is a pole and mud house with a dirt floor. Sometimes linoleum would be laid down to cover the floor. I mean, it was stamped down underneath. And they - it's heated by a wood stove that's often made out of a can from some grocery store. You know, it's - and there is nothing but what is - there's no transportation. There is very little to hunt left. There is - some people had gardens. But Zhaanat and her family live in a very traditional way, so she gathers a lot of food. They trap a lot of food. And this, my mother did, although they did have a fantastic garden. She still knows how to snare rabbits. And so they lived on a - they lived on the edge at all times. They bought nothing new. A pair of shoes was - lasted years. And the only person who could really keep them alive on their subsistence level was Pixie - or Patrice. She wants to be called Patrice. Everybody falls back into calling her Pixie, even me.

DAVIES: (Laughter).

ERDRICH: Patrice is the name by which - she's ambitious. She believes she will rise in the world.

DAVIES: Right. Right. You know, it's interesting. There's a - the high school math teacher, Lloyd Barnes...

ERDRICH: Yes.

DAVIES: ...Is taking on her brother Pokey home at one point. And you write that as he approaches the house, he didn't realize it was an edifice for humans; he thought it was a place for animals.

ERDRICH: Yeah. I mean, they were very simple structures, and the barns were often made out of the same sort of materials. These were indigenous materials, you know, right from the woods and right from the ground. It was at that time, however, that people could also get these newly built, sort of prefab one-bedroom houses. I have pictures of my own grandparents' house arriving on the back of a tractor. You know, people could get these through the tribal housing at the time, but somehow they never did. So they were still living in this sort of house. And that was uneven housing up through the '70s - no running water, no electricity.

DAVIES: You said your mother knew how to snare rabbits and maintained a garden. Did she grow up in these kind of circumstances, this kind of poverty?

ERDRICH: No. My grandfather was one of the most enterprising individuals on the reservation. My mother's family lived with very, very little, but they had a lot of security. And they all went to school every day. It was a point of pride for my grandfather that he read everything his children read when they brought the books home. So they had a very different kind of life.

DAVIES: There was a member of the Paranteau family who is not there in this story, and that is the older sister Vera.

ERDRICH: Yes.

DAVIES: ...Who has left for the cities, as it's called - that's Minneapolis-St. Paul. This is a fascinating part of the story. And she had left with the help from the relocation office. You want to explain what that was and kind of what role it played in the departure of people like Vera?

ERDRICH: Relocation was a program that interlocked with termination. You see, the idea was after the tribe was terminated, they would be able to sell their land and be moved to an area, quote-unquote, "of greater economic opportunity," which would mean a city. So they were setting up this move during the '50s with this relocation program.

You would - a person who wanted to move would get some training, some stipend for a short amount of time and then, basically, be turned loose in the city.

I've been asked by people, well, why wasn't that great? Why didn't people just want to move away from their reservation and become like everybody else? You know, I've been asked that question. It's a fair question. And the answer is because native people aren't like everybody else, and native people want to stay who we are, right? And that's because the government made a very firm decision not to put money into the infrastructure on reservations, not to keep the treaties. The treaties stated that they would provide for health, education and the general welfare of native people as they struggled into this new form of existence. And that was basically rent for all that the rest of the country enjoys; all of the lands, all of the rivers, all of the places that no longer belonged to Native Americans.

DAVIES: This young woman, Vera, leaves the family and goes to Minneapolis-St. Paul. And one of the things that happens in your novel is that her younger sister, Patrice, goes to find her because they've lost touch with her. They haven't heard from her in months. And it turns out she's in a city where there are criminals and sex traffickers who play on - prey on women from the reservations. Was this a pattern back then in the '50s?

ERDRICH: It's a pattern that was established from the first contact between native people and European people. And now there is a lot more awareness about missing and murdered Indigenous women. And it hasn't - of course, it hasn't stopped. It's probably gotten worse. But, yes, to your question.

DAVIES: Is that an issue that you or others have, you know, been active in advocating on?

ERDRICH: Yes. Yes, indeed. It's an issue that's been - public awareness has been growing. There is enormous movement in the Twin Cities. On Valentine's Day, there are women and men marching in red to symbolize our sisters who have been missing and may have been murdered or have been murdered and are missing in that way.

DAVIES: We're speaking with Louise Erdrich. Her new novel is "The Night Watchman." We will talk more after a short break.

This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF NOAM WIESENBERG'S "DAVKA")

DAVIES: This is FRESH AIR. And we're speaking with writer Louise Erdrich. She has a new novel called "The Night Watchman." I'd like to - for you to share another reading with us from the novel "The Night Watchman." This involves Patrice Paranteau, this young woman who is one of the main characters. And it involves a terrible experience

she'd had in high school where some boys had gotten her into a car and taken her out and had sexually assaulted her, particular this guy named Bucky (ph).

She managed to extricate herself before it went too far and flee, but she lost her shoes there. And I'm going to mention that her mother appears in this reading. Her name Zhaanat. And this reading begins with where she has gotten back from this terrible experiences. And she's beginning to - she's in bed, and she's kind of collecting herself and looking at her injuries.

ERDRICH: (Reading) That night, she took a lamp behind the blanket and looked at the scratches, the bruises. There was even a bite mark on her shoulder. She'd felt none of it, but she could still feel where his hands went. She was shaking, squeezed her eyes shut, crawled under the blanket. The next day, more bruises had surfaced from under her skin. There was that phrase, they got under my skin. She showed these marks to her mother and told Zhaanat everything that the boys had done. And they had her only pair of shoes. Her mother had let her breath out sharply two times.

Then she put her hand on her daughter's hand. Neither one of them said a word. It was the same thing with both of them, and they knew it. Later, when Patrice heard about Bucky's twisted mouth and how it was spreading down his side, she looked at her mother's face, serene and severe, for a clue. But Patrice knew that she herself had done it. Her hatred was so malignant it had lifted out of her like a night bird. It had flown straight to Bucky and sank its beak into the side of his face.

DAVIES: And that is Louise Erdrich reading from her novel, "The Night Watchman." Yeah. This guy who perpetrated this assault, Bucky, has, essentially, a paralysis on one side of his face. And it is widely believed that Patrice's mom, Zhaanat, had done this. And this is...

ERDRICH: Or he had...

DAVIES: Yeah.

ERDRICH: ...Maybe he had Bell's palsy. Everything that I write like this has to have another explanation.

DAVIES: Well, that's what I was...

ERDRICH: That's a rule for me.

DAVIES: (Laughter) OK. Well, that's just what's interesting because this is one of many moments in the story where we see things that could be regarded as potentially supernatural - right? - or spiritual or magical. I mean...

ERDRICH: Yeah.

DAVIES: There was a case when Patrice goes looking for her sister in Minneapolis and encounters a horrible place. And a dog tells her a clue. The dog speaks to her. And I wonder, does she think she hears the dog? Tell me about that...

ERDRICH: Right.

DAVIES: ...And whether this was part of the kind of things that you heard from your family.

ERDRICH: Yes. You know, they're also - people have experiences. If you have a group of people, and you ask, has a dream ever come true? Have you ever had an experience where you thought you were in the presence - a supernatural presence? Have you ever heard a voice that didn't seem to come from anywhere? You'd get so many stories. And I like to ask people this question because I always get interesting stories. So many things happen to us that we immediately explain away, and so I'm just not explaining away what's happening. That's all it is. It's not magical realism.

DAVIES: This is a very rich story with many plots and a lot of characters, and it's really fun reading. But, you know, it is based upon this really consequential event, which was this attempt to, as you say, terminate, you know, the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, which was, in the end, defeated because your grandfather managed to mobilize, with meager resources, a delegation and a persuasive case and take it to Washington. And, you know, after the end of the novel, at the end of your acknowledgments, you have a paragraph which kind of capsulizes this. You want to share that with us?

ERDRICH: I would love to. And this is why I wrote the book now at this time.

(Reading) If you should ever doubt that a series of dry words in a government document can shatter spirits and demolish lives, let this book erase that doubt. Conversely, if you should be of the conviction that we are powerless to change those dry words, let this book give you heart.

DAVIES: You were really inspired by what your grandfather did, weren't you?

ERDRICH: I really was. I couldn't believe I'd gone through life not - you know, knowing about his job, knowing about him and knowing about termination, but I'd never put it together until a few years ago. It astounded me, and I'm grateful to him for what he did. But also, I believe what he did inspired other tribal nations to fight back against termination, and it was a long, brutal fight for survival. Not until the '70s did Richard Nixon end termination and proclaim that the new order of the day would be sovereignty. That started us on an entirely different path.

DAVIES: You're an enormously successful writer with a great following, and you've continued to live pretty near where you grew up. You're - I think you're in Minneapolis, right? Why have you stayed where you grew up?

ERDRICH: I have a bookstore there, for one thing. What would I do? I can't move my - we can't move Birchbark Books. But this is the sort of thing that people would be told, like, why don't you live in Minneapolis among the financial elite - right? - or somewhere else? I mean, I feel that I've really moved into an entirely - I was born in Minnesota, but I grew up in North Dakota. That's where I continually go back to my parents, who live there in Wahpeton, and my brother and my sister live there.

So no, I was miserable when I had to live far away from my family. I never wanted to really go, and I found it difficult to get back. I would never leave. I love where I am.

DAVIES: So your bookstore Birchbark Books, that's in Minneapolis, is that right? No? That's where you live.

ERDRICH: It is. It is.

DAVIES: Right. And do you actually run the register and run the store?

ERDRICH: Oh, you're going to make me laugh. Nobody lets me near the register.

(LAUGHTER)

DAVIES: Why?

ERDRICH: You don't want to hear. I mean, we would be in terrible trouble if I tried to take hold of that part of the operation. No, everybody kind of warns me off. I'm there to help - I help run it in different ways. My daughters all have worked behind the register, have all work lugging books up here, back, forth to different events. And I'm at different events, but I mainly am a very strong cheerleader and friend. The - my colleagues at the bookstore are my favorite people, and they're part of family.

DAVIES: And there's not a lot of independent bookstores around anymore. What compels you to keep this going?

ERDRICH: Well, we're a growing subset of Amazon (laughter), I suppose. But we're - there are an increasing number of small bookstores. And the reason we're surviving and, in many cases, thriving is because we can - people begin to realize that we pay our taxes, you know, that we offer community services like bringing writers in and supporting local school systems and supporting literacy, you know? We do a lot for our communities. And we also are - we're romantic. You see; I don't know how many proposals have happened in our bookstore, but they do. And how many acts of forgiveness have also happened because we have a confessional in our bookstore. And

all you need to do is touch it, and it's - and your sins are forgiven. It's become a forgiveness booth, so there's these things...

DAVIES: Wow.

ERDRICH: ...You know, that an independent bookstore can do that are also supernatural. I mean, it's a magical realism place, I guess.

DAVIES: Well, Louise Erdrich, thank you so much for your time and for your writing. I appreciate you talking to us.

ERDRICH: And you; thank you so much.

DAVIES: Louise Erdrich's new novel is "The Night Watchman." Coming up, John Powers reviews the Brazilian film "Bacurau" that's part political fable, part horror thriller and, he says, funny. This is FRESH AIR.

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Other Links and Resources:

For more information, please see http://www.answers.com/topic/louise-e...

Author Biography:

Louise Erdrich is one of the most gifted, prolific, and challenging of contemporary Native American novelists. Born in 1954 in Little Falls, Minnesota, she grew up mostly in Wahpeton, North Dakota, where her parents taught at Bureau of Indian Affairs schools. Her fiction reflects aspects of her mixed heritage: German through her father, and French and Ojibwa through her mother. She worked at various jobs, such as hoeing sugar beets, farm work, waitressing, short order cooking, lifeguarding, and construction work, before becoming a writer. She attended the Johns Hopkins creative writing program and received fellowships at the McDowell Colony and the Yaddo Colony. After she was named writer-in-residence at Dartmouth, she married professor Michael Dorris and raised several children, some of them adopted. She and Michael became a picture-book husband-and-wife writing team, though they wrote only one truly collaborative novel, *The Crown of Columbus* (1991).

The Antelope Wife was published in 1998, not long after her separation from Michael and his subsequent suicide. Some reviewers believed they saw in *The Antelope Wife* the anguish Erdrich must have felt as her marriage crumbled, but she has stated that she is unconscious of having mirrored any real-life events.

She is the author of four previous bestselling and award-winning novels, including *Love Medicine; The Beet Queen; Tracks; and The Bingo Palace.* She also has written two collections of poetry, *Jacklight, and Baptism of Desire.* Her fiction has been honored by the National Book Critics Circle (1984) and *The Los Angeles Times* (1985), and has been translated into fourteen languages.

Several of her short stories have been selected for O. Henry awards and for inclusion in the annual *Best American Short Story* anthologies. *The Blue Jay's Dance,* a memoir of motherhood, was her first nonfiction work, and her children's book, *Grandmother's Pigeon,* has been published by Hyperion Press. She lives in Minnesota with her children, who help her run a small independent bookstore called The Birchbark.

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