

National Native American Hall of Fame  
2019 Inductee

**LOUISE ERDRICH**  
**TURTLE MOUNTAIN CHIPPEWA**



**WRITING**  
**AWARD WINNING AUTHOR**

1 - 2 50-minute class periods

## **SELECTED COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS**

### **CCSS Literacy SL 10-1**

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

### **CCSS Literacy SL 10-1d**

Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.1**

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2**

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

### **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.3**

Analyze in detail a series of events described in a text; determine whether earlier events caused later ones or simply preceded them.

## **GOALS FOR UNDERSTANDING**

### **Students will understand**

- Louise Erdrich is an award-winning writer of poems, short stories, and novels
- Louise Erdrich is a successful writer and mother of 6 children
- Louise Erdrich is a member of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Nation

## **ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS**

How does Louise Erdrich express her Native culture in her writing?

How did Louise Erdrich become a successful writer?

What types of emotions does Louise Erdrich's writing bring forth in you?

## **ASSESSMENT EVIDENCE**

### **Suggested Formative Assessment of Learning Outcomes**

Active listening through note taking

Small group discussion

Class discussion

### **Culminating Performance Assessment of Learning Outcomes**

- Students will finish their own small group K/W/H/L charts
- Participate in a small group discussion
- Answer the essential questions when reporting out as a group to the class

## **ENTRY QUESTIONS**

Who is Louise Erdrich?

What achievements did Louise Erdrich accumulate during her career to be inducted into the National Native American Hall of Fame?

Of which Native American Nation is Louise Erdrich a member?

## **MATERIALS**

Computer and internet access for the following videos is required. Additional written materials for printing is at the end of this lesson.

4-minute video interview by Bill Moyers

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=1&v=HaedpQmh8Go&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=HaedpQmh8Go&feature=emb_logo)

8-minute PBS Newshour video: Conversation with Louise Erdrich about her novel *The Roundhouse*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDL5QgH511s>

26-minute video: Read North Dakota Presents; A Conversation with Louise Erdrich (2012)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=68&v=yWI32GHB4so&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=68&v=yWI32GHB4so&feature=emb_logo)

## LEARNING MODALITIES

Audio/Visual: Students will watch recorded interviews with Louise Erdrich and hear about her remarkable career and literary legacy. Watching and listening to Louise read her prose and speak about her lifelong influences will engage students in ways that reading can't.

Writing/Recording: Students will take notes during their listening and viewing, which they will use to complete the K/W/H/L chart in the small groups.

## OVERT INSTRUCTION

- 1) The instructor divides the class into groups of four and asks each person and each group to begin making a "K/W/H/L" Chart, which stands roughly for "What they Know/What they Want to Know/How to Research this topic/What they Learned" . These K/W/H/L charts are part of the note-taking process for students throughout the National Native American Hall of Fame *Inspirational Leadership* curriculum. This strategic content organizer helps keep learners focused on the fundamental aspects of learning about a historic figure.

The teacher can introduce Louise Erdrich by showing a short interview to the class, which is linked here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=1&v=HaedpQmh8Go&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=HaedpQmh8Go&feature=emb_logo) which can be accessed through streaming services on the internet.

- 2) After viewing Louise's speech, the instructor asks the class to read the short biography, which is attached as an addendum at the end of this lesson. Using the

information in the bio, the students begin completing their learning graphic organizer charts.

- 3) After about 15 minutes of discussion and chart work, the instructor will distribute hard copies of the three poems attached at the end of this lesson. The students will take time to read each poem, passing them among themselves.
- 4) Following the video interviews and reading of poems, students will spend 20 minutes answering the following questions in their small groups. Every team member will contribute, with one person recording highlights of the information on a separate sheet. This information can also be utilized for the group K/W/H/L chart.

### **Questions**

- a. How did Louise Erdrich's poems reflect her Native American background?
  - b. Which one of the poems did you like the best, and why?
  - c. What type of imagery did Louise Erdrich use in her poems?
  - d. What types of emotions are brought up by Louise Erdrich's poems? Why?
- 5) Following the small group discussions, each group will report out on their answers, and the answers will be included into a class K/W/H/L chart organized by the instructor on a smartboard or projector.
  - 6) The instructor will open the discussion to include any final thoughts, questions or insights about Louise Erdrich and her writing and role in society.

### **This concludes the first 50 minutes of the lesson**

### **Extension Exercises**

Students who wish to continue their research on Louise Erdrich can visit her website and read more of her poetry and novels. Upon further research and review, students can write an essay where they attempt to answer the following questions:

What are the unique qualities and background that gave Louise Erdrich the foundation to achieve great things as a writer?

What major themes does Louise Erdrich explore most commonly in her writing?

### **CRITICAL FRAMING**

Louise Erdrich is a trailblazing writer and intellectual, who provided important leadership as an artist and academic at Dartmouth in the 1980's. Coming of age on the heels of the Red Power Movement, Louise Erdrich's generation became adults in the era of Self-Determination. Her brilliant writing bridges the generational gap between 20<sup>th</sup>

and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and provides fearless insight into the historical legacy of colonial America and its impact on Native Americans.

## **DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION FOR ADVANCED AND EMERGING LEARNERS**

Louise Erdrich's world-class talent and remarkable journey through life make her an inspiration and role model for Native American people and women around the world. For advanced students who wish to continue their study of Louise and her accomplishments, reading one of her novels is an opportunity to explore more in depth her amazing sense of the human condition as well as her creative brilliance. Emerging learners can also be inspired by Louise's writings, although novels may be too long of a read. Her short stories and poetry are perfect for reflection and skill building.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES





## In Louise Erdrich's 'Night Watchman,' tribal and personal history converge

By Laurie Hertzell

Minneapolis Star Tribune |

Mar 10, 2020



In her latest novel, "The Night Watchman," Louise Erdrich explores the U.S. government's efforts during the 1950s to terminate protections granted Native Americans in treaties -- and her grandfather's efforts to stop it from doing so.(Ulf Andersen/Getty Images)

MINNEAPOLIS — Toward the end of Louise Erdrich's new novel, a character named Thomas Wazhashk heads to Washington, D.C., to testify against a bill. If it passes, its policies would eliminate all federal services to Indians, move families off their reservations and almost certainly destroy the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa.

And yet before heading home, Thomas stops at the office of the bill's author to thank him for listening to his testimony. The senator was stunned. Nobody had ever done this before.

"This really happened," says Erdrich. "My grandfather" — Aunishenaubay Patrick Gourneau, on whom the character of Thomas is closely based — "was the most kind person. He had the sort of quality that you don't really run into in politics very often, that sort of gentility. And he had incredibly good manners."

"The Night Watchman" is set in Turtle Mountain in the 1950s, a time when the U.S. government planned to "emancipate" Indians, band by band and tribe by tribe, from their Indianness. Terminate their protected status guaranteed in treaties, end their government health care and education, abolish tribes, relocate them from reservations to cities, stop any kind of aid or payments for taking their land.

Two dozen of the 113 tribes this happened to became extinct, Erdrich notes. The Turtle Mountain Band, thanks to the incredible efforts of her grandfather and others, did not.

Those good manners, that gentility, Erdrich said, "I think really won the day for them."

Erdrich tells this story from a comfortable easy chair in the downstairs of her shop, Birchbark Books and Native Arts in Minneapolis. Outside, it is 5 degrees; inside, a cozy electric fire glows at her side as she sips Earl Grey tea.

She has a thick, woolen scarf wrapped around her neck and sturdy, fierce black boots on her feet. A person could do just about anything in those boots. ("Aren't they great?" she says, holding out one foot. "They're my favorite thing.")



"We Are One Bond," a print by Chholing Taha (Cree First Nations), is an example of the expanded offerings available at Louise Erdrich's Birchbark Books and Native Arts, in Minneapolis. (Chholing Taha / HANDOUT)

A few feet away, dozens of cardboard cartons labeled "signed" are stacked neatly against the wall, and hundreds more copies of "The Night Watchman" await her signature, slotted onto tall shelves and stacked on a table. On the walls hang paintings by Frank Big Bear, Dyani White Hawk and other Native artists.

Erdrich is not an absent landlord; this store, which she has owned since 2001, is a big part of her life. The basement is where she is launching a new online shop to sell Native art.

“We've always had family working at the bookstore. My daughters have all worked there, my nephews and nieces worked there, and young Native people, young people have always worked there,” she said.

She considers Birchbark Books her biggest work of art. “You put emotion and dedication and love and money into art, and this is my art.”

The problem of real people

Erdrich, 65, grew up knowing that her grandfather had been involved in preventing termination, but for a long time she didn't have a strong understanding of what that meant.

Then Patrick Gourneau was inducted posthumously into the North Dakota Native American Hall of Honor, and she began to realize more fully the role he had played in saving the band. “I thought, this is extraordinary,” she said. “I couldn't stop thinking about what he had done.”

For years, she had read and reread her grandfather's beautiful letters — handwritten to her parents in elegant boarding school script, packed with news and stories and laced with great humor. But after the Hall of Honor ceremony in 2018, she put the letters in chronological order against the timeline of the termination attempt, and suddenly the magnitude of what the government had planned to do, and what her grandfather had done to stop them, became clear.

Erdrich had been struggling to write another novel, reaching that familiar stage where she was pretty sure that she had no more books in her. But as she looked at her grandfather's letters, “All of a sudden it was: Ah, I'd been working on this book all along.”

Brenda J. Child, a historian for the University of Minnesota and a Red Lake Ojibwe, said she was thrilled that Erdrich was writing about the termination era. “She has such a wonderful sense of history in her work,” Child said. “She makes termination into a wonderful, human story so you can see what stakes Native people had — what they were trying to protect.”

Even more remarkable, Child said, is the family connection to the history. “Her grandfather was a fantastic letter writer. To have family documentation of these experiences is quite a rare thing.”

Still, writing about real people — let alone a beloved family member — was difficult, Erdrich said. While the character of Thomas is based on her grandfather (a factory watchman himself), he is not her grandfather. “I tried as much as possible to fictionalize him. It's a hard edge for me to stand on, having a real person that I was basing a character on. I never do that if I can help it.”

Several other real people, including Arthur V. Watkins, the Utah senator behind the termination bills, appear in the book, though briefly.

“I don't know how people write about real people,” Erdrich said. “If you can't find a direct quote of them saying what you want them to say, how do you put words in their mouth?”

Almost all of Watkins' quotes in her novel are verbatim, taken from the Congressional Record. And lest this make the book sound dry or scholarly (it is neither), just take a look at page 397 where Erdrich

announces the upcoming congressional hearing. In addition to Thomas, she writes, speakers will include “a ghost, a PhD candidate, and a stenographer.”

Wait, what — a ghost?

Fact plus fiction plus magic

As in previous Erdrich books, the past and the present and the dead and the living all swim together. Early in the novel, as Thomas tries not to fall asleep on his overnight watch, he sees what appears to be a young boy sitting on top of a band saw.

This detail came from one of her grandfather's letters. Gourneau worked all night at the factory, and he worked all day on tribal business. He slept, Erdrich said, only about 12 hours a week.

In one letter, “He says that he got very exhausted one night and his head dropped and he dropped his sandwich on the floor and he thought he saw a little boy. That's how exhausted he was,” she said. “And I kept going with the little boy. Imagined who he was.” He became a character, the ghost of a child she named Roderick who follows Thomas to Washington.

For years, Erdrich has researched Native history, driving down to Kansas City, Missouri, in the summers with Brenda Child to pore through tribal documents at the National Archives there. “I love doing research,” Erdrich said. “It's my candy — it really is. I feel guilty because I'm not actually writing, I'm just taking notes.”

Those archives produced a wealth of material, including her grandfather's boarding school files and dozens of his letters.



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**'Original Fire'**  
**A Poem by Louise Erdrich**

From *Freeman's Literary Hub*

May 10, 2019 By [Louise Erdrich](#)

*for Aza*

I watch my daughter build a fire  
not from a match or cigarette lighter  
but from the original elements,  
two sticks, a length of sinew, friction.  
She has formed a cup of juniper shreds,  
and when she spins out a black ember  
and breathes it to life  
she transfers the radiant pebble  
into the nest and breathes again.  
Sparks fly from her lips.  
A dove of flame bursts from between her hands.  
She speaks to the spark  
until the words catch and burn  
and I think, here is my daughter  
who is innocent of all things  
yet from whose lips  
the terrible and merciful  
flame flies out, the truth, the fire.

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## **Indian Boarding School: The Runaways**

By Louise Erdrich

Home's the place we head for in our sleep.  
Boxcars stumbling north in dreams  
don't wait for us. We catch them on the run.  
The rails, old lacerations that we love,  
shoot parallel across the face and break  
just under Turtle Mountains. Riding scars  
you can't get lost. Home is the place they cross.

The lame guard strikes a match and makes the dark  
less tolerant. We watch through cracks in boards  
as the land starts rolling, rolling till it hurts  
to be here, cold in regulation clothes.  
We know the sheriff's waiting at midrun  
to take us back. His car is dumb and warm.  
The highway doesn't rock, it only hums  
like a wing of long insults. The worn-down welts  
of ancient punishments lead back and forth.

All runaways wear dresses, long green ones,  
the color you would think shame was. We scrub  
the sidewalks down because it's shameful work.  
Our brushes cut the stone in watered arcs  
and in the soak frail outlines shiver clear  
a moment, things us kids pressed on the dark  
face before it hardened, pale, remembering  
delicate old injuries, the spines of names and leaves.

Louise Erdrich, "Indian Boarding School: The Runaways" from *Original Fire: Selected and New Poems*.  
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## **I Was Sleeping Where the Black Oaks Move**

By Louise Erdrich

We watched from the house  
as the river grew, helpless  
and terrible in its unfamiliar body.  
Wrestling everything into it,  
the water wrapped around trees  
until their life-hold was broken.  
They went down, one by one,  
and the river dragged off their covering.

Nests of the herons, roots washed to bones,  
snags of soaked bark on the shoreline:  
a whole forest pulled through the teeth  
of the spillway. Trees surfacing  
singly, where the river poured off  
into arteries for fields below the reservation.

When at last it was over, the long removal,  
they had all become the same dry wood.  
We walked among them, the branches  
whitening in the raw sun.  
Above us drifted herons,  
alone, hoarse-voiced, broken,  
settling their beaks among the hollows.  
Grandpa said, *These are the ghosts of the tree people  
moving among us, unable to take their rest.*

Sometimes now, we dream our way back to the heron dance.  
Their long wings are bending the air  
into circles through which they fall.  
They rise again in shifting wheels.  
How long must we live in the broken figures  
their necks make, narrowing the sky.

Louise Erdrich, "I Was Sleeping Where the Black Oaks Move" from *Original Fire: Selected and New Poems*. Copyright © 2003 by Louise Erdrich. Reprinted with the permission of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.