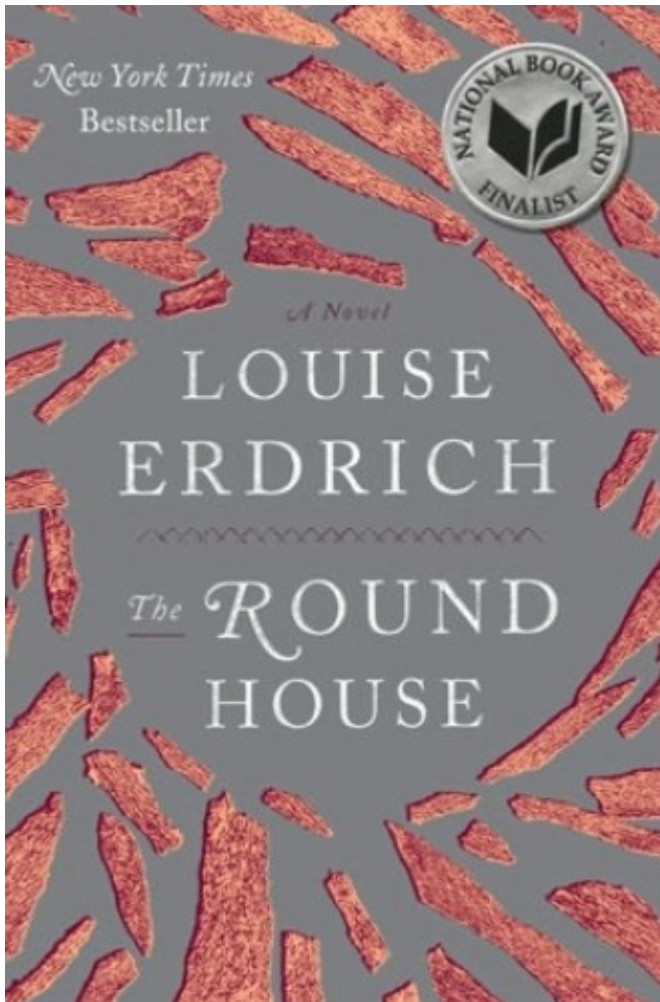


Tribal injustice

By [Debra Bendis](#)

December 14, 2012

In Review



The Round House

By Louise Erdrich

HarperCollins

A crime is committed at the round house, a sacred Ojibwe space on a North Dakota reservation. Immediately victim Geraldine Coutts and her family see their lives

change; while she retreats to her room and into silence, her husband begins to second police in their investigation. Thirteen-year-old Joe is desperate to see his family return to normal, and he adds his own sleuthing, sometimes done with his three buddies on bikes.

Whatever Louise Erdrich writes—whatever her subject—becomes great narrative. In *The Round House* she's chosen to expose the lack of justice that exists for women victims on contemporary Native American reservations. (Erdrich has Ojibwe ancestry.) But hers is no didactic essay or report but a great story, one that's loaded with sustained plot tension, laugh-out-loud humor and memorable, quirky characters.

There's Grandma Ignatia, who embarrasses the teenage boys by sharing sexual advice as well as fry bread; Grandpa Mooshum, who tells tales of the ancestors in his sleep; and a muscled Catholic priest who catches spying teenagers (yes, the same ones) and calls them "humiliating names without actually resorting to the usual swear words." Says Joe, "It was almost enough to make a boy want to be a Catholic."

The takeaway of *Round House*, winner in November of the National Book Critics Circle Award, is a result of the perilous and powerful combination of art and a social-justice alert. Because we won't soon forget Joe's story, we can't pretend not to know about the ongoing failure of our legal system to serve Native American women.