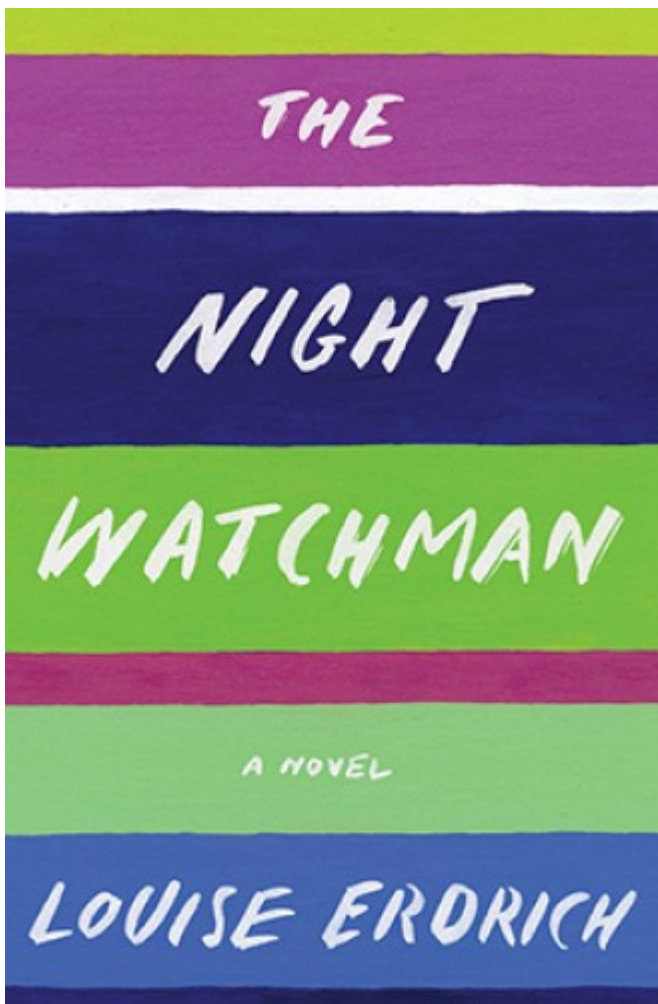


Louise Erdrich's novel gives names, faces, words, and life to the Chippewa Turtle Mountain Band

A story of survival in the face of termination

by [Joshua B. Grace](#) in the [September 9, 2020](#) issue

In Review



The Night Watchman

A Novel

By Louise Erdrich

Harper

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There's a moment in *The Night Watchman* when all the slow, patient work that Louise Erdrich does to introduce her characters and familiarize us with their lives suddenly crashes full speed into a powerful gut punch. Two worlds collide in a way that is nauseating, fearful, sad, and deeply ironic. This collision is important because it suddenly and entirely reshapes the story. It may also help us better understand our current sociopolitical environment.

When the video of a Minneapolis police officer crushing the life out of George Floyd made its way onto the internet and the Black Lives Matter movement surged to renewed prominence, demonstrators across the globe made Floyd's name into a rallying cry: "Say his name!" Why? Because they knew it was easier for white people in power to ignore the deaths of thousands of unnamed black men than to ignore the death of one specific man, whose name they knew—whose death they had witnessed and whose life they might come to understand.

This is a lesson that Erdrich clearly knows well. *The Night Watchman* beautifully and powerfully gives names, faces, words, and life to several members of the Turtle Mountain Band of the Chippewa tribe as they struggle to hold onto their land and their ways of life. We get closest to Thomas Wazhashk, the titular watchman of the local jewel bearing factory, and Patrice "Pixie" Paranteau, a young woman who works at the plant. We meet a supporting cast of a dozen or so other characters as well, but these are the two most central to our experience of the story.

Ultimately, Erdrich's story is less about individuals than it is about the Turtle Mountain Band's survival in the face of a "termination bill." *The Night Watchman* is fiction, but it is loosely based on real events. As Erdrich explains in an author's note, the United States Congress introduced a bill in 1953 that was designed to nullify treaties that the US had made with American Indian nations for "as long as the grass grows and the rivers flow."

The bill was a knee on the back of the Turtle Mountain Band's neck. It claimed that it would emancipate the Turtle Mountain Chippewa if it was signed into law. But emancipate really meant end. As Thomas notes at one point in the novel, the bill was written by someone whose forebears had made war on the Native Americans. All that time the tribes had suffered, they had still survived. Now they faced death

by cruel, bloodless language circulating in the distant halls of Congress.

The Night Watchman is the story of the Turtle Mountain Band's resistance to the bill. We know this because the book starts moving when the bill first arises, and it concludes with the bill's ultimate fate. We follow the tribe's response to the bill from beginning to end. That's the shape of the book. But that's not how it feels.

How does the book feel? It feels deeply and wonderfully human. The early marketing materials feature a quote from the *San Francisco Chronicle*: "Like Toni Morrison, like Tolstoy, like Steinbeck, Erdrich writes her characters with a helpless love and witnesses them with a supreme absence of judgment." This is true for Thomas and Patrice. We get to know them and care for them. They don't just forward a plot. They aren't simple. They're complex, vibrant people with hopes, fears, and confusion that we come to know.

But Erdrich's love for her characters runs far beyond just these two. We meet their families, friends, and coworkers. We spend time with the white math teacher who has fallen for Pixie. We spend time with the boxers, the old drunks, and the ghosts. While this isn't fundamentally a work of magical realism, it does contain elements of it—elements that remind us that we, too, have moments of spiritual transcendence.

The world of *The Night Watchman* is personal, social, professional, political, and spiritual. Erdrich writes unflinchingly about the good and the bad, and she makes excellent use of shifts in point of view. In some chapters she switches between five or more characters' points of view, and the effect is always to remind us that there's more to the story than what we see from outside those characters. This is true even with the characters we know mostly through the bad things they've done. When we step inside their skins for an instant, the world expands in new dimensions. It's a reminder of the power of the written word—how effortlessly Erdrich can expand her world.

In a way, it's frightening that this novel has become so timely. It's frightening that many of us needed a video of a murder to recognize how terrible it is for people to be dehumanized for the color of their skin—or for any other reason. And it's frightening that when the gut punch comes in *The Night Watchman*, it too takes place in Minneapolis.