



Junior Warden Ken Kelling's reflection on Louise Erdrich and her 2021 Pulitzer Prize for *The Night Watchman*

June 2021

In October, 2019, the Ascension Book Group read and discussed the book "The Future Home of the Living God" written in 2017 by Native American author, Louise Erdrich. The story takes place in a dystopian world reeling from a cataclysmic event. Evolution is reversing itself; women are giving birth to primitive babies. The story revolves on the rights of women to have their babies and to protect themselves and their babies from government interference. She uses the world of the Native American Reservations in North Dakota and Minnesota, the world she knows best. Like "The Handmaid's Tale" by Margaret Atwood, where one can see some parallels, it is a fascinating tale that looks at the ethics, morals, and religious ideologies that come into play as the story advances.

On Friday, June 11, 2021 it was announced that Louise Erdrich was the 2021 recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Literature (Fiction) for her most recent novel, "The Night Watchman", published in March, 2020 by Harper Collins Publishers.

What caused the author to be of especial interest is that I have a personal connection to her. From 1996-2008, I resided in North Dakota just east of the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation located on the Canadian border. I spent a number of years teaching in the Turtle Mountain Community Schools. I worked with many of Ms. Erdrich's relatives and spent some time involved in the Turtle Mountain community. I also had the opportunity to take a very small group intensive writing class with Louise Erdrich for one week, all day, every day around 2002. The most important thing that we learned in that week long seminar is that we express ourselves best when we incorporate things into our writing that come from the world we know, from the things which we have personally experienced. Like Illinois author, Edgar Lee Masters of Petersburg, Illinois, Louise has had some criticism from members of her community who have read her books and feel that they see themselves and their personal stories exposed to the world outside the community. Louise Erdrich has never denied that things from her past or that of the community may creep into her stories; but the images are amalgam-

ations or conglomerations of persons and events with no one specific person inferred. Her latest book may be a bit of an exception.

The Pulitzer Prize winning book by Louise Erdrich is "The Night Watchman", released in March, 2020. The story inhabits the world of historical fiction as it tells the story of Thomas Wazhashk. "Thomas Wazhashk is the night watchman at the jewel bearing plant, the first factory located near the Turtle Mountain Reservation in rural North Dakota. He is also a Chippewa Council member who is trying to understand the consequences of a new "emancipation" bill on its way to the floor of the United States Congress. It is 1953 and he and the other council members know the bill isn't about freedom; Congress is fed up with Indians. The bill is a "termination" that threatens the rights of Native Americans to their land and their very identity. How can the government abandon treaties made in good faith with Native Americans "for as long as the grasses shall grow, and the rivers run"?" (Harper Collins Publishers).

The story is based in part on the life of her own grandfather, Patrick Gourneau, a night watchman for the Turtle Mountain Jewel Plant and who led the fight to prevent the government in 1953 from eliminating the reservation system and abandoning treaties that had been promised "for all time." Add to this characters who are trying to live their lives for better or worse, fighting their own best and worst natures, and trying to come to terms with who they are as individuals, as a family and as a community and all of whom are struggling for the survival of their livelihoods and community.

Congratulations to Louise Erdrich for another fantastic foray into the world of fiction and for the well deserved honor. She was formerly short listed for the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for her 2009 book "A Plague of Doves". Among the many other awards she has received throughout her career is the 2012 National Book Award for her novel "The Round House". She currently resides in Minneapolis and is the owner of Birchbark Books, a Native American bookstore which also offers Native American arts and crafts for sale.