

Louise Erdrich shares thoughts on her One Book novel

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Publication info: Argus Leader [Sioux Falls, S.D.] 21 Sep 2008: 1.

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Abstract: Humanities scholar Ivan Fuller, a theater professor at Augustana College, says the book is an excellent choice not only because of its regional connection but also because of its literary value. [...] it's inspired.

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Full text: Even though Louise Erdrich's intricate storytelling in "The Master Butchers Singing Club" is set in neighboring North Dakota, she captures readers from the Midwest and beyond, her readers say.

That's because Erdrich's style is compelling and often surprising.

"She weaves those stories - richly, wildly imaginative - and then says, this is what's going on," says Sherry DeBoer, executive director of the South Dakota Humanities Council.

Erdrich's 2003 release "The Master Butchers Singing Club" was selected as the One Book South Dakota for 2008, a book that everyone in the state is encouraged to read.

In the novel, Fidelis Waldvogel immigrates from Germany after World War I to the small town of Argus, N.D., to start his own butcher shop. Waldvogel's family - wife Eva and four children - soon join him in Argus, a town that holds many secrets beneath the surface.

Erdrich intertwines the Waldvogel family with the life of Delphine Watzka, a woman whose quiet demeanor is stood to the test throughout her life's journey.

Humanities scholar Ivan Fuller, a theater professor at Augustana College, says the book is an excellent choice not only because of its regional connection but also because of its literary value.

"It's so inventive and rich in the writing. ... They'll find events that are moving, humorous to heartbreaking. It poses a good challenge to readers, but it's not so challenging that it would scare them away," he says.

Erdrich, 54, who lives in Minneapolis, has written a dozen novels, many of which are best-sellers and carry awards, including the prestigious Pushcart Prize (1983).

Her recent works include the new release "The Plague of Doves" and a short story collection "The Red Convertible: Selected and New Stories, 1978-2008," which comes out in January. She also recently wrote and illustrated "The Porcupine Year," a children's book that is a sequel to two other award-winning books about a young Ojibwe girl and her family.

Erdrich discussed the importance of setting, character development and "The Master Butchers Singing Club" in a recent phone interview.

QUESTION: Your grandfather was a source of inspiration for the story. He was a master butcher, fought in World War I, won the Iron Cross and then moved to the U.S. Had you been wanting to write this novel for a while in homage to your grandfather's story?

ANSWER: He was a much more heroic person than anyone in the book, my real grandfather. He was an extraordinary man. He came over in the '20s and worked his way through Iowa into Minnesota. He started out just working an endless number of hours at different people's butcher shops, and then he opened his own master butcher's shop. My real grandfather was a much better person. In a way, it's inspired. I knew this man, but he really was sort of larger than life - very strong and intelligent and really an Old World craft person.

Q: Had this idea been mulling around for a while for you?

A: It had. Part of it is that I'm very close to my father. My father's side of the family is German. I grew up and spent time in my grandfather's butcher's shop. Those memories were very powerful for me. I learned a lot, and I

loved them. They were very strong-minded, kind of funny people that were storytellers.

Q: In a 1986 interview in the Chicago Tribune, you commented, "My fondest hope is that people will be reading me in 10 or 20 years from now as someone who has written about the American experience in all of its diversity." Do you think this novel contributes to your writing about the American experience? Is that something you're still aiming to do in your work?

A: It certainly would be part of a diverse experience. It's very different than the first couple of novels. ... It's not really for me to say. It's for other people to see whether they see an America they recognize somewhere in the book.

Q: In the novel, Delphine and Eva develop a remarkable friendship. How important was this friendship, and were you planning on that relationship being so close or did it develop as you were writing the novel?

A: I didn't plan it, but I think it really took over, and sometimes that happens when you have two characters. They will not exactly write themselves, but they'll suggest new ways of looking at the book or their relationship. This has happened with both of them.

Q: You have an intricate plot line, and at the end of the novel, there's a surprise twist. Did you plan that ending, or did it just happen?

A: It happened, I didn't plan it. I was surprised by it myself. I had been setting something up all along that would be answered, but I didn't think it would be answered. The ending came to me all in a rush one day, and I practically just wrote it in a day. It was the last thing I wrote. I wrote the whole book in sequence, it was unusual that way. ... I was pregnant. As I started the book, I thought, I've got to finish this book. I was maybe 30 or 40 pages in, I realized I had to finish it before my baby was born. I just kept writing. I set myself a goal that I had to really work hard on this one. I was getting farther and farther away from the desk. I wanted it to be more of a piece. ... It's mostly constructed really as a novel.

Q: How long did it take to write?

A: In a way, it took 20 years. But I wrote the bulk of it in about a year and a half.

Q: You've chosen to use North Dakota as a setting. Why have you chosen to stick with a Midwestern setting for many of your novels?

A: It's what I know best. I'm lucky enough to get over to North Dakota a lot: My parents live there, I teach there sometimes. ... It's where gravity draws me. Minnesota is also a setting. I don't really venture too far afield. I really like to write places where I've been and that I can describe.

Q: You write for a variety of audiences, including children's books and novels. Do you enjoy this diversity in writing, and do you plan to continue writing children's books and novels?

A: I plan to, but I find children's books really exhausting. They are very satisfying once they're done. In fact, I really love having done them. People think they're easier - they're harder to write. I draw for them as well. I start drawing my illustrations of the children's book, and I get very ... involved.

Q: What is the most rewarding part of connecting with readers at a conference like the upcoming Festival of Books?

A: I'm looking forward to coming to Sioux Falls. It's right down the road from where I grew up. I do look forward to that a lot. I'm excited to see people I know and love in Sioux Falls.

Q: Do you have writing rituals that you use? Is there any certain time of day that you write or any things that you gravitate toward in your writing process?

A: I try to write as long as I can during the day. I write by long hand.

Q: What is your advice for aspiring authors that you would give about the writing process?

A: I'm not much on advice except to say that you should always be persistent.

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Erdrich: Her grandfather inspired novel

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