

**The Plague of Doves**  
by Louise Erdrich

**New Wine in Old Wine Flasks**  
Presentation By Thomas Matchie  
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## New Wine in Old Wine Flasks

<b>Plague of Doves</b>	<b>Earlier Novel</b>
Opening Image (neg./pos.) Plague/Couple Escapes	<i>Little No Horse</i> Flood/Female Priest born
Prairie Setting Pluto, No. Dak. (town disappearing)	<i>Beet Queen, Master Butchers</i> Argus, No. Dak. (the Depression)
Surprise Ending Cordelia's epiphany	<i>Master Butchers</i> Step & 1/2's revelation
Grotesque Figure Sr. Godzilla	<i>Tracks, LNH</i> Sr. Leopolda
Religious Figure Billy Pearce evangelist	<i>Little No Horse</i> Fr. Damien's growth
Erotica Evelina & Nanette (cf. Anais Nin)	<i>Tales of Burning Love</i> Marlis & Candace; Eleanor
Clandestine Sex Backfires Judge & Cordelia John Wildstrand & Neve	<i>Painted Drum</i> Anaquot & Simon Jack
Greek/Roman Philosophy Marcus Aurelius/Epictetus	<i>Antelope Wife</i> cf. Aurora, Deanna/ Hades, Cerberus
Violence Family massacred Hanging of Indians	<i>Master Butchers</i> Family suffocated Vivian's fight ( <i>Crown of C</i> )
Comedy Fr. Cassidy's sermon	<i>Bingo Palace</i> Lipsha's vision quest ( <i>BQ</i> ) Nanapush's lines, quest ( <i>T, 4 Souls</i> )
Role of Music Shamengwa's violin Corwin's violin	<i>Little No Horse</i> Agnes's piano (Chopin) Fidelis's singing ( <i>Master B</i> )
.Power of love Mooshum & Junesee	<i>Love Medicine</i> Albertine for Lipsha, Lipsha for Shawnee Ray ( <i>B.Palace</i> )



## New Wine in Old Wine Flasks

My topic has to do with the various ways Louise Erdrich's new novel *A Plague of Doves* picks up on old themes and techniques from her previous adult fiction. In reading and rereading the new venture I've discovered at least a dozen ways she looks back to the old while generating new and creative stories that continue to be a testimony to her special gifts.

Initially, it's important to realize that in *Doves* there are four narrators. Evelina sets up the novel. She's the grand daughter of Mooshum, and perhaps the leading character. Then Judge Coutts at different times in his life addresses some adult love affairs, including his own, which always end in disaster. The third is Marne Wolde who, along with Evey, is responsible for the most erotic episodes in *Doves*. And finally, Cordelia Lochren, a former mistress of Coutts and later the town doctor, ends the novel.

It's also significant for understanding *Plague of Doves* that nine of the stories were previously published in magazines before being brought together in novel form. And there are some telling changes in the process, including using new names that help make the stories work together.

The first way she's both old and new is employing a powerful opening image, like a plague of doves (one thinks of Hitchcock's *Birds*), which is both beautiful and horrifying. Recall the opening of *Little No Horse* where Agnes DeWitt rises out of the flood waters, the muck of the Red River, to become Fr. Damien Modeste, setting up the novel. In *Doves*, as a result of the plague of birds, a host of people become mired in the filthy terrain. out of which rises Mooshum (Seraph Milk) and his wife-to-be Junesse, who escape to western North Dakota. So different images, both graphic.

Besides employing a new image, this novel focuses on not one but many characters. Moreover, it is a series of stories, set in a rural context, narrated by multiple narrators. The layout goes back to *Beet Queen*, except that these are not children, or adolescents growing up, but adults involved in major ironic conflicts, whose stories are told now by a vastly more mature writer.

Secondly, the ending of *Doves*. Here Cordelia's revelation is a total surprise relative to a massive murder in the book. Think of *Master Butcher*, which also contains the murder of a family. In the end we learn anew through Step-and-a-Half connections to violence in the novel.

But that comes to us in third person. In *Doves*, the narrator is the female doctor in Pluto, North Dakota. Her story is an elaborate piece about stamp collecting, robbery, and suicide. It involves two women, Cordelia and Neve Harp. It is told in the context of preserving history when the evidence is quickly disappearing, like the rural North Dakota town of Pluto itself. So employing an opening image and final surprise are not new in *Doves*, but the kind of image and the elaborate ending are unique and highly creative.

A third connection to previous novels is obvious, The author includes different stories, contained in themselves, but working together for a whole. This is as true in *Doves* as it is as far back as *Love Medicine* and as late as *Painted Drum*. Now many of the tales pulled into *Doves* were published in magazines like the *Atlantic* and the *New Yorker*.

But there are problems. In this novel the setting is really a northwestern town (Pluto) in North Dakota along the Great Northern Railroad. One of the stories is entitled “Town Fever,” and it is about a group of men who venture out in the winter of 1857 to found the place. It’s a story about survival in a cold climate, together with some love relationships which go sour. The original story, appeared in the *North Dakota Quarterly* (2006). I heard her read it in Moorhead years before it was published.

The story is about several men who start out in St. Paul and venture to the mouth of the Red River—the meeting of Bois de Sioux and the Otter Tail Rivers in Minnesota—near Wahpeton, North Dakota. In the novel she leaves out these rivers, but keeps references to St. Cloud, which is some distance from North Dakota. The characters, however, are mentioned at other places in the novel, and that seems to tie the book as a whole, as do a couple of failures in love experienced by characters on the expedition.

Then there is the business of music. Think of the uniting power of singing in *Master Butcher* or Damien playing Chopin in *Little No Horse* where she makes the snakes rise, undercutting the snake in *Genesis*. In *Doves* it’s the violin in the hands (or I should say broken arm) of Shamengwa, brother of Mooshum, and then his disciple Corwin Peace. Here music adds an underlying tone, uplifting, yet sad. It’s like *Man of LaMancha*, where loss somehow surfaces as ennobling. . In the end of *Doves*, Corwin’s music contributes to such a final epiphany. Erdrich, who loves music, here plays another kind of tune.

Fifth, there's the topic of religion on the reservation, which is always interesting because of Louise's German Catholic Chippewa background. In *Doves* there's a traditional priest, Fr. Cassidy, interested in the minutia of confession, like confessing impure thoughts, when Mooshum (Seraph Milk) is both amused and even jokes about hellfire, but secretly he's taken back, for later we learn (through Sr. Anita counseling Evelina) that he has a role in something far more serious, the murder of Indians in the novel.

Erdrich treats the priest so differently from Damien in *Little No Horse*, who virtually imbibes a Chippewa spirituality. By contrast, there's a scene in *Doves* where this priest actually gives a funeral homily on the wrong man, Mooshum, now living and seated in the audience. It's hilarious, much like the movie *Waking Ned Divine*—which you may have seen.

But in *Doves* there is more that's new on religion. There's a story about a evangelistic preacher, Billy Peace entitled "Satan, Hijacker of a Planet," narrated by Marn Wolde, who not only falls for the guy, but is thoroughly sucked in by his passionate approach. In the end, however, we experience another ironic but surprisingly violent ending—passionately told, but leaving one aghast at the implied critical commentary on religion. Still, we are literally seduced by Marne's strange involvement, frightening but convincing.

What's also interesting about this novel vs. her short stories, is that there is an erotic section which ends the short story which is placed differently in the novel. In the short story Billy Peace penetrates Marne in a brutal but apparently satisfying episode (p. 169). In the novel that same paragraph appears midway in the piece, which then ends quite differently, as I have indicated. In both cases the religious/sexual encounter grabs the reader, but in entirely different contexts—one fulfilling and the other terrifying.

Another dimension of *Doves* is related to the author's use of the grotesque, which I think she learned from Flannery O'Connor. We're familiar with Sr. Leopolda in *Tracks*, *Tales*, and *Little No Horse*. While this woman does some good, she's a lunatic, basically lacking in love. In *Doves* there's Sr. Godzilla, a physically deformed creature is embarrassed by Corwin Peace in the classroom in a sad but comic way. Then she emerges later on in a conversation with Evey who goes to her as a lesbian for counseling. Here ironically, we discover something of the nun's own guilt as a Buckendorf that sheds new light on the Indian massacre in the novel.

I've already spoken of the erotic/religious relationship between Marne Worlde and Billy Pearce. But there are other stories of love relationships which may involve sex, but have a much bigger context related to the disarming power of love. Most Erdrich novels deal with some kind of love relationship. Think of *Love Medicine*, *Bingo Palace*, *Tales*, *Four Souls*, *Patined Drum*, and so on. In *Doves* several of the stories involve such relationships, two especially narrated by Judge Coutts.

The first is "Come In" (entitled "Gleason" in the *New Yorker*, the name for Billy Peace in the novel). It is about John Wildstrand (an ancestor of Mooshum's wife Junesse) and his plan to get out of his marriage to Neve Harp. He enlists Billy, his girlfriend's brother in a plan to fool his wife so he'll get the house, where he'll live happily ever after with Maggie and their baby. But Neve's father Mundo in the nursing home smells a rat and Neve accidentally recognizes Billy as the kidnapper. The title refers to John welcoming Billy to his prison cell.

Also narrated by Judge Antone Bazil Coutts is his own marriage to Geraldine, Evelina's aunt, coupled with his affair with the doctor, Cordelia, which also backfires, so that he literally loses both house and home. This is an intriguing story, first published in the *New Yorker*. It's interesting that in her story, the final one in the book, both she and Wildstrand's Neve live alone, walk together and save the history of the town.

Still, the most spell bounding piece (at least in my judgment) is Evelina's lesbian bout with Nonette, a mental patient in the ward at the University of North Dakota. It goes far beyond the relationship of Marlis and Candice in the back seat of the snowbound car in *Tales of Burning Love*. Indeed, this one rivals *Broke Back Mountain* in its intimacy and fundamental impact.

These stories look back to the opening image of *Doves* when the terrifying plague hits, for the stories are personally horrifying. Or they connect to the very name Pluto—Greek god of the underworld—because of their dark aspect. Pluto, of course, is the name of the town just outside the reservation in *Doves*, and there is a philosophical theme in the novel which, if you look closely, is very revealing. Pluto as a planet is the tiniest, most distant, and last discovered of the planets. It's almost not there. Like Pluto, North Dakota itself. But the dark side suggested by the god Pluto is also important because of the tragic stories in the novel—not only the murder, but the broken love relationships through betrayal and abuse.

But there's more. Michael Dorris, you know, was steeped in classic philosophy, and Louise includes many such references in *Antelope Wife* where Richard Whitehorse Beads out of love abducts Sweet Calico from her rural setting and takes her to the city where she is abused. But it all backfires on the man. Says Epictetus the Stoic, mentioned in *Doves*, "Control thy passions, lest they take vengeance on thee."

In *Doves* in "Demolition" Judge Coutts is reading the *Meditations* of the second century Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, as well the Roman poet Lucretius, and the Greek philosophers Epictetus (father of Stoicism) and Plotinus (founder of Neoplatonism). One can see these various moral philosophies working in the background of the characters, whether involved in love relationships, murder, or even (in one telling story) stamp collecting.

That last story is most telling because it involves, not only the solution to the family murder, but a reflection on the fate of Pluto itself as a once lively town. Here Cordelia and Neve are involved in the historical society, and through Neve's recalling the story of a bank robbery and a forged letter, she discovers that the valuable stamps were saved in spite of various kinds of destruction and waste. So Cordelia makes the connection to her working with a mental patient who leaves scraps of bills related to his guilt. What both uncover is something valuable that is preserved though much is lost, much like the little town like Pluto vanishing with time.

And last but not least, the terrain itself, and adventure on the prairie. Erdrich has acquainted us with various parts of Dakota, from the barren flatland during the Depression in *Beet Queen* and *Master Butcher*. In *Painted Drum* she moves back from the east through Fay Travers to North Dakota, and to legends there, to plumb the depths of her Ojibwe self.

In *Doves*, the novel begins with an escape from the plague west to the North Dakota badlands, but then the stories settle in Plato, along the Great Northern Railroad on the way to Minot. One has to get a sense of the area, which is not the Red River Valley, but a little town in the hinterland which, like so many in Dakota, are disappearing or now gone. *National Geographic* in the current issue has an article on this topic. Erdrich examines this whole phenomenon in *Plague of Doves*.



So she has a new novel, but it's the same creative writer, who simply doesn't quit. All her books are related mythologically, but also through theme and technique. In *Doves* she has truly added some new wine to some old wine flasks. And the result in my mind truly—to use an well worn word—awesome.

## Adult Novels by Louise Erdrich

Love Medicine (1984)

The Beet Queen (1986)

Tracks (1988)

Crown of Columbus (1991)—with Michael Dorris

Love Medicine (1993)—four new chapters

The Bingo Palace (1994)

Tales of Burning Love (1996)

Antelope Wife (1998)

The Last Report of Miracles at Little No Horse (2001)

The Master Butchers Singing Club (2003)

Four Souls (2004)

The Painted Drum (2006)

The Plague of Doves (2008)

Shadow Tag (2010)

## **Books by Louise Erdrich**

### **Novels**

Love Medicine (1984)  
The Beet Queen (1986)  
Tracks (1988)  
Love Medicine—expanded version (1993)  
The Bingo Palace (1994)  
Tales of Burning Love (1996)  
Antelope Wife (1998)  
The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse (2001)  
The Master Butchers Singing Club (2003)  
Four Souls (2004)  
The Painted Drum (2005)  
Shadow Tag (2010)

### **Short Stories**

Best American Short Stories—guest editor (1993)

### **Poetry**

Jacklight (1984)  
Baptism of Desire (1989)  
Original Fire (2003)

### **Nonfiction**

Imagination (1981)  
“Where I Ought to Be: A Writer’s Sense of Place” (1988)  
The Blue Jay’s Dance (1996)  
Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country (2003)

### **Children’s Literature**

Grandmother’s Pigeon (1996, 1999)  
The Birchbark House (1999)  
The Range Eternal (2002)  
The Game of Silence (2005)

## **Books by Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris**

### **Nonfiction**

Route Two (1991)

Conversations with Louise Erdrich & Michael Dorris (1994)--  
ed. by Allan Chavkin and Nancy Chavkin

### **Novels**

The Crown of Columbus (1992)

## **Books by Michael Dorris**

### **Novels**

A Yellow Raft on Blue Water (1987)

Cloud Chamber (1997)

### **Short Stories**

Working Men (1993)

Rooms in the House of Stone (1993)

Paper Trail (1994)

### **Children's Literature**

Morning Girl (1992)

### **Nonfiction**

Native Americans: Five Hundred Years After (1977)

A Guide to Research on North American Indians (1883)

The Broken Cord (1889)