Debra Magpie Earling's Perma Red: Another "Tale of Burning Love"

In the spring of 2002, when Debra Magpie Earling published Perma Red about a Flathead Indian reservation in Montana, the final product was not entirely new. She had struggled with the manuscript for twenty years, including a 1993 preview (cf. Ploughshares). But by the turn of the century several Native authors--among them Welch, Erdrich, Susan Power, and Alexie—had written novels of individual growth amid all the oppressive factors on the reservation, including white exploitation of the land, education of youth depriving them of their religion and culture, excessive alcoholism, abuse of women by white and Indian alike, and the list goes on. Also common in novels of this time are stylistic factors, such as the protagonist's personal/spiritual growth amid all kinds of obstacles, juxtaposition of stories resulting in a fairly unified novel, and a poetic texture giving the work a reflective if not ambiguous quality that defies any set or clear interpretation. Perma Red embodies all of these connections to Native writers, but also to white authors as far back as D. H. Lawrence (Ott).

Still, there is a sense in which Perma Red stands alone, and some critics agree (Bogenschutz, Ott). Joseph Amato, in a recent book entitled Rethinking Home: A Case for Writing Local History, says that a successful story about a local scene depends, not just one's writing ability and sense of audience, but the author's use of sensory detail. Says Amato, when a writer is imitative, stereotypical, or simply fashionable, the manuscript fails (cf. Landsford). Perma Red runs this risk because Earling writes in a Native genre that is now highly popular. What I hope to do is isolate different ways in which this author, in contrast to those whose writing she parallels, uses details that make her story original and therefore successful as literature. Back of Perma Red is a story of

Earling's aunt after whom she created the novel's protagonist, Louse White Elk (Abrams 2). Earling had to change the novel for publishers to keep it from becoming too long and perhaps too realistic a portrait of this aunt. But in the end the story she creates is both fictional and yet strangely real. Ultimately, it is the story of a redheaded, feisty woman in a time and place, a Montana reservation in the 1940s, that Earling knows first hand (Rakoff 64). And it is the specifics with which she tells this woman's story that makes this novel work.

Overall, Perma Red is the story of a psychic, sensual relationship between Louise, who is of mixed blood, and Baptiste Yellow Knife, a full-blooded Flathead who "adheres to the old ways and resists all contact with whites and authorities" (Bogenschutz). He is also a mystic with psychic powers with which he tantalizes Louise from childhood to adulthood. On the opening page we are told that when Louise was nine, Baptiste

> . . . blew a fine powder in her face and told her she would disappear. She sneezed until her nose bled, and Baptiste gave her his handkerchief. She had to lie down on the school floor and tilt back her head and even then it wouldn't stop. She felt he had opened the river to her heart. (3)

In short, Earling uses details like these to exemplify how Louise is mystified by this man, and though she loves him she comes to hate his power over her as a woman; she wants to be herself. That power manifests itself throughout the novel, and eventually Louise marries Baptiste. He not only leaves her for another woman, but abuses her physically when she tries to reject his love. Indeed, at one time she denies knowing him when he is drunk, beaten, and most in need (223). Still, that magnetic pull that binds the two together surfaces in the end, however tragic their relationship in between.

So what other novels exist in the background of Earling's attempt to tell her story of abusive but enduring love? D. H. Lawrence's novel Women in Love is about a couple, Ursula and Birkin, who strive to be themselves while simultaneously becoming one. Is this story a mirror of Louise's paradoxical quest for Baptist? There may be a parallel to Birkin and Ursula's relationship, for Lawrence typically strives to plumb the depths of individual consciousness, where "balance or polarity in love is fundamental to sensual vitality." But Birkin also develops a relationship to another man, which fails, says Cavitch, "leaving Lawrence's ambivalence toward women more acute than before (55, 64). In Perma Red Earling developes the Louise/Baptiste relationship at length, but unlike Lawrence, she is not interested the homoerotic. And Earling sets her love/hate relationships, not against sexual fulfillment, though the novel is erotic, but against Louise's need to escape the abuse of the educational system, to transcend physical hunger on the reservation, and somehow to find an outlet for her independence as a woman. If there is a sub-conscious element in her relationship to Baptist, it is rooted in the psychic powers of people like Baptiste's mother, Dirty Swallow, with which she curses Louise for her unfaithfulness to Baptiste. '"Agree to marry him," she says, "or someone in your family will be bit." (16). This power is passed on to Baptiste and becomes part of their relationship, but this whole context is quite removed from Lawrence's more Freudian approach.

Speaking of mystic power, Susan Power's Grass Dancer is about a love affair between Harley Wind Soldier and a grass dancer, Pumpkin, who after saying "I'm a part of you" (45), dies in a car crash following their departure from the dance floor. Charlene Thunder, who also loves Harley, blames the death on her own grandmother, Anna

Thunder, connecting this mishap to an unfulfilled love between Ghost Horse, a sacred clown, and Red Dress as far back as the 1840s. So we get traditional mystic ways operating in the present, causing death, and interfering with love. In Perma Red the traditional ways operate through Dirty Swallow, Baptiste's mother, to cause death and assure a particular marital union. Dirty Swallow often rebukes Louise, and is supposedly responsible for a snake bite, nearly killing her sister Florence, and later Florence's actual drowning. Still, in this novel the old woman is less instrumental in determining the love relationship of Louise and Baptiste than the specific choices of both as their tragic stories evolve. Moreover, in this novel, the mishaps involving Florence also involve other men in the plot, namely Jules Bart and Charlie Kicking Water, both of whom Louise rejects as lovers, but who emerge late in the novel to actually help her to survive and ultimately to consumate her love with Baptiste. So Earling is really using a factor in Native culture in her own way, indeed integrating it into her plot, not merely usurping something from Power.

Perma Red is really divided into two parts, Louise's early life and that after she leaves school and marries Baptiste. The early part is largely devoted to her lack of family and abuse as a child in several school systems. Abuse of Indian children in a white educational system is a major theme in Native literature. Mary Crow Dog in her autobiography, Lakota Woman, describes physical beatings by the priests and nuns, driving her to drink by the age of ten (35, 46). Louise Erdrich in a chapter entitled "Saint Marie" in Love Medicine is far more subtle. Here Marie outwits her mentor, Sister Leopolda, turning burns from a hot poker into Christ-like stigmata, undercutting the nun and "canonizing" Marie. Earling in Perma Red is no less concerned about how

Louise White Elk is treated as a young parentless student, but her story is unique in its horrifying details, which are often too realistic to be humorous. Here the Catholic sisters think Indians are "stupid," and after Louise's girlfriend, Ernistine Chief Spear, chokes to death in a fit, the nuns lock Louise in a room with the dead body so that she wouldn't "scare the others." Louise

> . . . had banged on the door . . . clawed at the walls until her fingers bled, and no one came. . . . She had been alone all night and morning in that closed room. The smell. The smell of bad death in a sealed room." (36)

Says Charlie Kicking Woman investing the case, ". . . cruelty would never be a crime around here." There are other telltale details regarding Louse's school days as when the nuns use "tape to hold her breasts, just as she was feeling the "changes in her body" (55). Mr. Braddock moves her to all-white schools in Dixon, and then Thompson, where she is abused by the students, but constantly runs away because "no one came to help her" (57). Then she is shipped to Mrs. Shelby Finger's house, where in a comedy reminiscent of a dime western, she witnesses the mother toting a deer rifle while catching her lover with her daughter, Arliss, whereupon, pulling up his pants, he leaves as Arliss, naked, looks on. This is Earling's attempt at humor. The situation also provides the context for Louise to run away again, this time to marry Baptiste as a means of avoiding school and guardians, but most of all, Mr. Braddock.

Perhaps Earling is most indebted to a fellow Montanan, James Welch, for the overall theme of her novel. Winter in the Blood is about a sensitive but self-destructive young man on a Blackfoot reservation who lost his father, with whom he use to drink in a bar, as well as his fourteen-year old beloved brother, Mose. His Catholic

mother has remarried, leaving the narrator alone to travel the vast state of Montana. He brings home a Cree woman to satisfy his loneliness. Together with his horse, Bird, he struggles against an emptiness as vast as Montana, hoping to find something that would tie him to the land and his ancestors. The tone of the novel is somber as the narrator comes to see his faithful horse, his mother's new husband, Lame Bull, whom he learns not to hate, and his grandmother's death--he casually throws her pouch into the grave (176—as positive factors in his effort to recover some glimpse of a glorious past.

In Perma Red Louise, too, struggles for meaning in the wiles of Montana. Raised without a mother and estranged from her father, she runs from the Catholic nuns who tie her breasts, deals with the loss of her only sister, Florence, and sleeps with several men to escape poverty and isolation. But she too loves the land, which she envisions in a poetic way reminiscent more of Erdrich than Welch:

> . . . a rhythm of water moving slowly around the creek . . . the pause in the reed grass as a deep breeze pulled dust toward a higher place . . . . She had come to know the language of the fields, the thin weave at the roots of grass. Snakes. (15)

Abrams adds that it is this kind of lyricism that makes other books look like "cheap bottles of bad wine (1). But like Welch's protagonist she searches for ancient traditions, in her case through Baptiste Yellow Knife, whose mystic ways captivate her from the beginning. In the end she sees his horse Champagne—as significant as the narrator's horse Bird in Welch's novel, though in a more romantic way--coming toward her, symbolizing their deep love and unconscious union. But Winter in the Blood is basically a comic satire, says Velie, told from the viewpoint of a semi-adolescent whose actions

mocks a traditional past he cannot attain. It is "the bitter lament of an angry writer" (93). Earling in Perma Red is more serious, but no less angry. And Louise's struggle reflects the realistic flight of a strong woman from poverty and abuse, and a desire to consummate a deep love that seems to allude her, except in her dreams.

No doubt the closest Earling comes to another Native novel is Louise Erdrich's Tales of Burning Love, which features in this case a man, Jack Mauser, with five love/marriage relationships, which Erdrich depicts through multiple perspectives. Several of the women abuse or are abused physically and one in particular, Eleanor, emerges as Jack's sexual/spiritual companion. Perma Red is about Louise's multiple relationships, in her case to four men, and she too uses different perspectives to tell her story. And Earling highlights the abusive nature of several of these relationships—physically and psychologically. Yet in the end Louise comes together with Baptiste in a mystical way. In Tales, Jack's initial relationship is with June Kashpaw, whom he rapes his truck near Williiston in 1981 to start the novel. Later he abuses one of his other wives, Marlys, who says he "twisted my arm .... Shoved me. Hit me" (329). But then she wraps him in duct type while he is sleeping. When he is powerless she pierces his ears, plucks his eyebrows, waxes and shaves his legs, and forces him to put on high heels in order to demonstrate what a woman has to go through (332-33). Earling is less humorous and perhaps less original when Louise White Elk is beaten by Baptiste. But the details inherent in such violent acts are hair-raising nonetheless. After seeing Louise with the rich landowner, Harvey Stoner, Baptist (now drunk) hauls her from his car, "pinching her elbow so hard she felt the sting in her funny bone" (153). Then he "cracked her hard to the crown of her skull with a heat that

resembled comfort. She felt a crackle of light falling to her knees." (154). At the same time she remembers " the boot mark, the swollen blood-blue egg on her shin" (155) that she got from Baptiste. These are sensory images reminiscent of Erdrich, but here Earling--describing a man beating a woman rather than the other way around--is anything but funny.

But Louise White Elk is also aggressive in a physical way. Another man is her life is Jules Bart, a cowboy whose "disinterest attracted her" (39). Ironically, she sees his ugly side in a bar where he passes out. Now it is Louise who "slipped her arms beneath his armpits, pulling him up." Then "she kneed Jules Bart hard in the back once, and he burped and sat up" (42). Here the physical abuse issued by Louise is productive, and though she thinks Jules ignores her, he will return later to indict Harvey Stonner for their combined beating of Baptist and in the process save her husband. Later, Harvey beats her when she rejects his love, though, like Marlys in Tales, she again proves to be physically aggressive as a woman:

> He (Stoner) slammed her against his car door. The cold had numbed her . . . . She grabbed his testicles then and squeeze until her nails bit through skin. He slugged her the way a man slugs a man, the arm back and rounding with a drive, a knuckle- burning blow to her chest. . . . She let go of him. . . . She shot for the hills. (228)

Critics see Harvey's character as "contrived and stilted" (Publishers Weekly), for outside of women he is only interested in money and land. But he forms a necessary part of the plot, which involves all the men who pursue Louise. So none of the sensory details can be divorced from the overall story which expands quickly and intensely toward the end.

In regard to the book's structure. Erdrich's novels often resemble a collection of short stories. In Tales the different wives, except June, tell their stories regarding their marriages to Jack, though often the author switches to third person. In Perma Red, Earling does something unique. Charlie Kicking Woman, the tribal policeman, tells his viewpoint in first person, which alternates with third person for the rest of the plot, though this is often limited to Louise's thoughts. The effect of this structure is that we are privy to Charlie's insecurity, especially compared to Baptiste (90), but it is also through him that we learn much about Louise, including her abusive education and the utter poverty of her home.

> I thought all the Indians were poor, because we seemed to be, but we were not poor compared to the White Elks. . . . They slept on the floor, the cold seeping through the cracks, chinks of light poked through the walls without plaster. wallpaper was cold catalogue cutouts. They didn't have sheets, inly rough wool blankets that had belonged in better days to horses. I tried not to stare. (29)

These kind of facts help explain Louise's continuous flight, including her going out with the affluent Harvey Stoner. For Earling, the combination of Charlie's perspective, following and often completing a third person narrative, one that largely carries the plot, simply works. In contrast to Erdrich's Tales, where the perspectives are juxtaposed, and then pulled together in the end, one Earling story leads up to and depends upon the next, so that plot as a whole evolves organically. Indeed, the reader needs one story to explain another, as when Louise runs away from Baptist and Stoner, only to be found and protected by Charlie after the stranger she rides with hits a deer. Charlie has lost his wife over Louise, and he covers up for Louise when she should be turned in, even taking her

to his house, where foolishly he uses her sexually. Still, it is in this setting that he is able to evaluate all his actions. In the end Charlie grows, and with his final choices he emerges as an impressive human being.

Another obvious connection to Tales of Burning Love is the reality and symbolism of fire. In Erdrich's case, Mr. Schick, Eleanor's father, the funeral director, cremates himself along with his dead wife, who had had a sexual affair with Eleanor's husband, Jack. That's love medicine—a love so strong it goes beyond betrayal. If such love is a constant theme in Erdrich's works, Earling goes to great lengths to define her notion of the power, and yet the irrational nature, of love medicine. In Perma Red, after Louise claims she is going to marry Baptiste to free herself from Mr. Braddock and more adult supervision, she finds herself caught in a dilemma of love and hate. About that time Charlie Kicking Woman burns his fields, while Louise in the context of smoke and fire, dreams of giving herself to this Baptiste:

> . . . He looked at her nakedness. He looked at her breasts . . . . She watched his gaze as he tagged the swell of her hips, the thumbs press of her bell button . . . and for a moment she thought he would reach for her but he did not. He looked at her and then looked out over the reddened fields. (110-11)

Again, she is made a fool of when he leaves her alone. So she goes to a bar, makes love to the grotesque Stoner, whereupon she is pulled from his car and abused by Baptiste. In Earling's world that's love medicine, or her version of it. It is paradoxical—intensely irational, profoundly erotic, and often violent. Yet that love is still soul deep and binding, and Earling surrounds her characters' interaction with details, often clothed (as are the details in the erotic scene above) in the form of poetry.

There are certain elements in Perma Red that do border on the stereotypical. One of them is alcoholism in men combined with sexual exploitation of women. Here Earling's novel picks up on themes explored by Sherman Alexie in Reservation Blues. In that novel Victor and Junior, who play the guitar and drums for Coyote Springs, a Spokane Indian rock band, chase women, especially white women, and drink profusely as the band becomes more successful. Then, when the band fails in New York, Junior commits suicide, a testimony to the tendency of Native people to opt out when they cannot succeed in American society. Gloria Bird, a Spokane critic, calls Alexie's portrayal of Indians stereotypical, indeed "an exaggeration of despair" (47). In Perma Red Baptiste is a representative of "the old ways" and uses his mystic powers to mesmerize Louise. Still, Baptiste drinks profusely, beats his wife, and tries to make her jealous by courting Hemaucus Three Dresses, a much older woman. One critic calls this gesture on his part as a "forgettable" part of the novel (Publishers Weekly), and later this woman's mysterious death does not really help to exonerate Baptiste, though she is most likely killed by Stoner rather than Baptiste. What makes this novel different, however, and perhaps less contrived than Reservation Blues, is the connection of Baptiste's final situation to the plot. This context involves two white men who beat him, which may be realistic, but most importantly, Charlie Kicking Woman changes internally. After first ignoring Baptiste, Charlie in a complete reversal saves him in spite of himself, and in the process the mystic union of Louise and Baptiste.

Toward the end when Baptiste is beaten by Jules and Stoner, Louise herself is not innocent. Earlier in the novel, when she has the chance to help Baptise, she says she "no longer recognized" her husband (222), thinking a meal from Stoner was more important

than he (224). Her relationship to Stoner, however, ends in violence, and she runs for her life, only to be rescued and housed by Charlie, who has lost his wife over Louise. When Stoner and Jules beat Baptiste, Baptiste is too drunk to do harm. Charlie, who witnesses this violence, leaves Baptiste to the mercy of these men, thinking Baptiste, who he has picked up many times in the bar, deserves the beating. Beside, Baptiste is his competitor. Later, however, the plot reaches its climax when Charlie is rebuked at his house by Louise—not innocent herself--for shirking his responsibility. It is then that Charlie has an epiphany. Jules, who was helped by Louise earlier, informs Charlie of what he and Stoner did to Baptiste, whereupon Charlie goes back to rescue Yellow Knife, setting up the ending where Baptiste and Lousie reunite.

Like Junior in Alexie's novel, Baptiste is treated realistically. Though he has failed in many ways, however, he does not commit suicide, nor does he leave the reservation. Through Charlie he comes to know that Stoner is dead—having burned to death in a fiery car, which the reader knows was ignited by Charlie himself with Stoner's lighter (278). He also learns that Louise, though badly bruised, is still allive and "needed him" (289). Feeling (for the first time) "powerless and small," Baptiste knows he "was losing himself to drink," and he finally admits that "he drank because the white man had told him he couldn't drink." So now he "threw the bottle . . . so far from himself he didn't hear it hit the ground." Then he actually prays, "Give my life back to me," knowing that he was "asking for the life of Louise" (290). Whether this scenario is convincing is debatable. But Baptiste does change, whereupon the mounts his horse, Champagne, to ride in search of his wife.

Louise, too, sees the error of her ways, having denied Baptiste when he needed her most. But she is feisty enough to rebound, and in challenging Charlie, she moves him, in the context of Jules's call, to go back to Baptiste. In Earling's book the plot is all important, though some find it "predictable and disorganized" (Publishers Weekly). It works, however, because the relationship of Louise and Baptiste, although often contradictory, is convincing. Charlie's epiphany makes the difference, and the result is that, ironically, the "the old ways" prevail. Love medicine, which Earling defines in her own way, works its way to a convincing, albeit ambiguous, conclusion, for it is not clear whether the two lovers meet really, or in the mystic world of dreams. Baptiste is coming, riding on Champagne, and Louise, we are told, " stepped forward" (296). That ending, of course, must have been Earling's trade-off for not making this novel too naturalistic, in which case neither of the protagonists would have survived. As it is, the two are somehow alive and coming together, so that "the river" that Batiste had "opened to her heart" (3) as a child is still flowing. Their future, however, is left to the imagination of the reader.

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