Hero journeys: Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman*

James McDonald
19 September 2021

The Night Watchman, New York: HarperCollins, 2020, 464 pp .

The Night Watchman (Harper Collins, 2020) is American author Louise Erdrich's 12th novel. Winner of the 2021 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, *The Night Watchman* is an entertaining and edifying historical novel that tells the story of the Turtle Mountain tribe of Chippewa in North Dakota as they fight to survive the US government's attempt in 1953 and 1954 to "terminate" them.

Louise Erdrich is one of America's most celebrated living authors. Born of a German-American father and a mother of Chippewa and French descent, Erdrich has written mainly, but not exclusively, about Native American life, particularly in her home state of North Dakota. Her first novel, *Love Medicine* (1984), won the National Book Critics Circle Award, as did her novel *LaRose* (2016). *The Round House* (2012) won the National Book Award, and Erdrich has received a number of lifetime achievement awards, including the Library of Congress Award for American Fiction. With *The Night Watchman*, Erdrich turns to her family's history for her inspiration.

At the center of *The Night Watchman* is House Concurrent Resolution (HCR) 108, passed in August 1953, which was nothing less than an effort on the part of Washington to abolish Indian reservations and, thereby, the tribes themselves. With HCR 108, Congress had resolved to divest Native Americans of the last vestiges of their tribal lands, to "emancipate" them from their dependence upon government health care, food allotments and schools, and to relocate them to nearby cities. The dispossessed tribal members would then enjoy the rights and responsibilities of full-fledged American citizenship and assimilation. The tribes would no longer be legally recognized, they would sell off their land—their only possession— and their scattered people would be swallowed up by urban centers like Minneapolis and Fargo.

The leader of the Turtle Mountain effort to defeat HCR 108 is Thomas Wazhashk, who is based closely upon Erdrich's maternal grandfather, Patrick Gourneau. Like Gourneau, Thomas serves as the chairman of the tribe. In deference to the tribe's poverty, Thomas forgoes the thirty-dollar-per-month salary the chairmanship entails. He is a righteous character through and through. Thomas's near-flawlessness (at one point in the novel he confesses to his wife Rose that he took a drink, and her reaction suggests that in the past he may have had a problem) could be seen as an artistic weakness on Erdrich's part, but then some people, for all practical purposes, are nearly flawless. The question is whether the novel as a whole acknowledges conflicting motives and pursues difficult questions. For the most part the answer is yes, it does. But more on that later.

Thomas is the night watchman of the novel's title, proud of his job as the overnight security guard of the nearby jewel bearing plant where many of the reservation's women work, and where Patrick Gourneau too was the night watchman. Alone in the silent factory, Thomas does his hourly rounds and sits at his desk composing politic, sometimes fawning letters to senators, congressmen and anyone else he can think of who might help his tribe in its struggle for survival. He writes in the elegant hand of the Palmer method he was taught at the government boarding school, fitting for a character who negotiates between the tribe and the outside world, the past and the present.

Twenty-year-old Patrice Paranteau is the story's other main character. In fact, we spend more time in her company than with Thomas over the course of the novel. Patrice, determined no longer to answer to her childhood nickname "Pixie," works in the jewel bearing plant drilling holes in tiny pieces of sapphire and ruby that will "be used in Defense Department ordnance and in Bulova watches." Patrice lives in a small wood-and-mud house with her mother Zhaanat, a woman steeped in the traditional culture of the tribe, and her little brother Pokey, whose hapless math teacher and boxing coach "Haystack" Barnes (so named for his yellow hair) is infatuated with her.

Patrice is indomitable. She has fought off an attempted gang rape, and she eventually assists Thomas when he organizes a delegation to travel to Washington and testify before a Senate subcommittee. Central to her story, though, is the journey she takes to Minneapolis—a classic hero's journey—in search of her older sister Vera, who has traveled to the city in search of a future and has subsequently disappeared. In the city, Patrice is immediately immersed in a demimonde that is in part comical—she agrees to don a rubber Babe the Blue Ox suit and perform an underwater burlesque show in exchange for help in finding Vera—but a comical demimonde that borders on a lower, much more foul circle of hell.

Help arrives in the form of Wood Mountain, a young aspiring boxer from the reservation and a Sioux descendant of one of Sitting Bull's warriors. Wood Mountain is handsome, honest and enamored of the magnetic Patrice, but Patrice is on a quest and is not on the lookout for a man to love. The relationship between Patrice and Wood Mountain provides the novel with a satisfying source of tension up until its last chapters. Together the two take up the search for Vera and in the process solicit information from Wood Mountain's half-sister Bernadette, another young tribal member whom the city has captured and mistreated. We see what lies in store for the tribe should they be "terminated" and relocated.

If Thomas is a little too virtuous, Patrice is a little too indomitable. In Minneapolis for less than a day, she is driving hard bargains with criminals, even physically confronting them, and winning. But she is on a hero's journey, and we are in the realm of the allegorical, not that

of straight realism. After all, throughout the book characters are visited by ghosts, dancing stars and messenger owls. It is up to the reader to decide whether this is simply a stylistic choice or a case of wish fulfillment, of an author flinching before reality.

In either case, *The Night Watchman* does unfold its violent history gently. Vera is made a sex slave when she travels to Minneapolis for work, but what Erdrich chooses to show of this is simply an empty collar and chain and a pile of feces on the floor of an abandoned room. We are told that Patrice's father is an abusive alcoholic, but what we see is Zhaanat and Patrice taking turns on watch with an ax. The tribe lives in crushing poverty on their reservation, but what we're shown of this is their diet of lard on bread, tidy dirt-floor homes and clean but very sparse wardrobes. Hardship is everywhere but is everywhere muted, just enough to fend off despair.

Missing from the Turtle Mountain reservation as Erdrich depicts it is the despondency that invariably accompanies communal poverty. Depression, loss of pride in self and home, rampant substance abuse, the economic erosion of family bonds—one senses that Erdrich has posted a *cordon sanitaire* around such things. If there are evils on the reservation as Erdrich presents it, and there are, they must not be allowed to take center stage. And they certainly must not crush the spirit. Hence the outsized virtue, indomitability and strength of spirit of the reservation's inhabitants. And like the scapegoat of Yom Kippur, old Paranteau, Patrice's alcoholic father, carries the despair of the entire tribe within himself.

There are artistic justifications for this. The author would not want to perpetuate stereotypes of reservation life, for instance. But again, Erdrich is narrating a hero's journey—actually, two or three such journeys—and for these heroes, the underworld they must brave is not the reservation. The particularly lurid evil to be found in Minneapolis may be enough to crush the spirit, but the reservation is what Thomas, Patrice and the rest of the tribe are fighting to preserve.

Like the history it fictionalizes, the novel is inspiring in its presentation of the Turtle Mountain tribe's delegation to Washington. Thomas is literally indefatigable in his efforts, slapping himself awake in the long silent hours on the job, writing letters in a half-sleep that he does not remember having written. As he makes known to the tribe the seriousness of what the government has proposed, he receives an outpouring of support and self-sacrifice, one tribal member suffering frostbite to gather just one more signature for a petition, other members donating their meager savings for the delegation's trip to the Capitol.

The tribe holds a benefit boxing match between Wood Mountain and the white fighter Joe "Wobble" Wobleszynski to raise funds for the trip, and Erdrich makes clear that the whites in the area support the tribe in its struggle to survive. But this support is later explained by Thomas in a chapter called "Good News Bad News":

"The good news is that the county, the state, and our neighbors in off-reservation towns do not want us on their hands. The bad news is this isn't just because we're poor. They don't like us."

On the trip to Washington, the delegation represents itself effectively, aided by a sociological report prepared by Millie, a college-educated relative of one of the tribal members. The masterstroke, however, is one final moment of self-abasement on the part of Thomas, the last stop on this hero's journey through his own particular underworld.

While in Washington, Patrice witnesses something from the House of Representatives gallery, an actual historical incident, that changes her life. She later talks to Millie about wanting to attend law school, and it is suggested that Patrice's life will continue to be a quest. The last chapters settle the questions of Vera's whereabouts, Patrice and Wood Mountain's relationship and, most importantly, the fate of the Turtle Mountain tribe.

As the characters know, and as Erdrich emphasizes, HCR 108 was just one more assault on Native Americans in a centuries-long history of genocide and broken treaties, treaties that promised them their reservation lands "as long as the grass grows and the rivers flow." The source of this assault, however, warrants some consideration.

Anti-Indian racism unquestionably motivated or played a role in the actions of countless "white" soldiers and settlers from Cortez to Custer and beyond, to Utah Senator Arthur V. Watkins, who was the driving force behind HCR 108. In *The Night Watchman*, however, Erdrich does not succumb to the identity-politics ideology of our moment, to her credit as an artist. The cruelty and perfidy suffered by Native Americans is not understood in the novel to be ultimately assignable to a psychosis or genetic predisposition of white people to be racist. Rather, to the extent that she explores the matter, Erdrich presents the theft of native lands as the profit-driven enterprise of large concerns—governments and corporations—operating in an acquisitive system.

In an NPR interview in March of 2020, Erdrich noted that "the first tribes slated for termination were the Menominee and the Klamath. And the intent, because of the post-war housing boom, was to get those big stands of timber, which they did."

Racism is most explicitly explored in the novel in the characters Elnath and Vernon, two very young Mormon missionaries who introduce themselves to the tribe as "elders." Like Senator Watkins, the missionaries see the American Indians as "Lamanites," a lost tribe of Israel and destined for the flames if not converted. Once a Christian, the Book of Mormon still held in 1953, the Lamanite would become increasingly "white and delightsome." Elnath and Vernon are comically pathetic characters, allegorical figures for the ignorance and brainwashing that produce racism, and outrageously innocent as they pedal their noxious wares on the reservation, where most people are Catholic. Their world begins to crumble, though, when Vernon falls in love with a young Chippewa woman, the North Dakota winter begins to blow, and their missionary efforts go nowhere.

The Night Watchman is a well told and at times moving novel that rewards the reader's occasional indulgence with a heroic story and an important piece of history.