

SAMPLE TEXT 2

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LOUISE ERDRICH'S TRILOGY OF JUSTICE

Abstract: In three novels Louise Erdrich explores issues of justice involving the dominant white culture and Native Americans. *A Plague of Doves* and *The Round House* concern the aftermath of unpunished crimes committed by whites against Native Americans. In *A Plague of Doves* the movement of the narrative suggests that the decline of the white town where the crime occurred is retribution for the lynchings of the innocent Ojibwe. *The Round House* was at least loosely inspired by an actual case where a powerful white political figure raped a young Native American babysitter. The crime was immediately reported and investigated but covered up. Erdrich may be too close to the emotional subject of white rape of Native American women: her fictional rapist is melodramatic and unbelievable. Because the judicial system is unable to render justice, a thirteen-year-old boy kills the white man who raped his mother—clearly an unsatisfactory solution. *LaRose*, instead, focuses on a tragic accident rather than a crime, and it occurs within a community where whites and Native Americans are mixed. The conclusion demonstrates that the two cultures are now so intertwined that reconciliation rather than vengeance should be the response in issues of justice. This seems to me to express Erdrich's own view.

Keywords: justice, jurisdiction, reconciliation, crime, Native American, Louise Erdrich, *Judge Coutts*, *The Plague of Doves*, *The Round House*, *LaRose*

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In three evenly spaced novels written between 2008 and 2016, Louise Erdrich composed narratives that address questions of justice: *A Plague of Doves* (2008), *The Round House* (2012), and *LaRose* (2016). Each book is constructed around a central incident, but behind each event is a much larger tableau of wrong that is explicitly formulated only in *LaRose*, the last volume of the trilogy: "Loss, dislocation, disease, addiction, and just feeling like the tattered remnants of a people with a complex history. What was in that history? What sort of knowledge? Who had they been? What were they now?"

Why so much fucked-upness wherever you turned?”⁴ All of the novels explore these many interrelated issues, but only *LaRose* provides a viable solution.

The first two novels address miscarriages of justice in starkly polarized Native American-white relations: in *The Plague of Doves* some Ojibwe men were lynched for a crime they did not commit; in *The Round House* an Ojibwe woman is raped by a white man who cannot be touched by the law because of jurisdictional issues. Only in *LaRose* does Erdrich explore a case within a combined Ojibwe-white community where the conflict is not drawn in racial terms. Here the accidental killing of a five-year-old boy is expiated by the killer’s offering his own five-year-old son, LaRose, to the bereft family. This is a variation on an old-time practice in both Native American and American cultures of a family with a number of children allowing one to be adopted by kin who were childless or had lost a child. After a time the families work out a sharing arrangement, and LaRose ultimately brings the two formerly estranged families together.

The Plague of Doves refers back to an historical incident in a small South Dakota farming town: the Ojibwe men who discovered the murdered white family were hanged. The men were not guilty; they were simply convenient scapegoats because they were in the area and are Indians. One of those hanged was a thirteen-year-old boy named Paul Holy Track, known for his piety.⁵ His death was particularly agonizing. And one, Mooshum, was spared, cut down before he died because he was the one who told a white man that the Ojibwe men had been at the farm. It was carelessness attributable to his drunkenness, not intentional malice.

In an interview Erdrich described the origin of the novel:

The book revolves or spins off of a lynching of Native American — Native American men, young men. One boy was only thirteen years old. This particular incident, which occurred in 1897, haunted me. It really happened. . . . And this book talks about what it’s like for a community to come to terms with the lack of justice. There was never any justice done. This was an act of vengeance that reverberates throughout the whole community for generations. But by the end, people are so intertwined and intermixed that one of the descendants of both the lynchers and the victim says, you know, “There’s no unraveling the rope. We’re all in this together.”⁶

⁴ Erdrich, Louise. *LaRose*. New York: HarperCollins, 2016: 51. Further page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

⁵ See Beidler, Peter. *Murdering Indians: A Documentary History of the 1897 Killings That Inspired Louise Erdrich’s “The Plague of Doves”*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013.

⁶ Louise Erdrich Interview. Online at https://www.democracynow.org/2008/6/6/native_american_writer_and_independent_bookseller

Erdrich's final sentence sums up the central principle of her fiction: since the wrongful conquest of Native American land, the lives of Native Americans and whites have become so "intertwined and intermixed," like her own ancestry, that the constructive response is to find a way of reconciling the two cultures, at least on the small scale possible in her novels.

Mooshum and his granddaughter Evelina make a pilgrimage to the hanging tree to leave Holy Track's boots there. This is, she tells her grandfather, "sentiment instead of justice." So long after the event, sentiment is all that is possible. Erdrich seldom punishes her characters severely, even when conventional wisdom would suggest that they deserve it. Part of this is her disposition as a person, but another part is realism: people do get away with terrible crimes, and the world will move on.

In *The Plague of Doves*, justice is impossible because the crime was long in the past, the perpetrators scattered and dead. Even small details are subject to distortion. Recounting how his ear was shot by his brother Shamengwa, Mooshum tells Evelina, "My brother pissed himself all the way down his legs that time." His daughter corrects him: "Shame on you, Daddy. You're the one who peed himself."⁷ Mooshum may be self-serving, but he is now so old that he has become a figure of fun, carrying on an improbable romance. Erdrich wishes to set the record straight but not to punish him for the thoughtless betrayal that led to the death of three companions. [...]

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⁷ Erdrich, Louise. *The Plague of Doves*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008: 256. Further page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

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