Introduction

Louise Erdrich’s twelfth novel, The Plague of Doves (2008), traces the intertwined lives of whites and Native Americans in the small Minnesota town of Pluto over the course of a century. The novel begins in 1896, with an infestation of passenger pigeons—the “doves” of the title—which Erdrich uses as a multilayered symbol for the rest of the novel. The novel’s central event is the brutal murder of five members of a white farm family in 1911 and the subsequent lynching of three Native Americans—one a thirteen-year-old boy—accused, but innocent, of the crime. In the ensuing years, members of Pluto’s white community and the Ojibwe Indians from the nearby reservation intermarry, work alongside one another, and develop friendships and feuds, until eventually nearly every resident is in some way connected to the murders. Critics almost unanimously acknowledged The Plague of Doves to be a challenging work in its subject matter and its complex narrative structure, but the result, according to Joan Frank, writing for the San Francisco Gate, is a rare literary achievement: “[Erdrich’s] accomplishment in these pages is Tolstoy-like: to render human particularity so meticulously and with such fierce passion as to convey the great, glittering movement of time.”

Full Text:

Major Characters

Judge Antone Bazil Coutts is a descendant of the white explorer Joseph Coutts, one of the founders of Pluto, North Dakota.

Evelina Harp is a young woman of mixed blood trying to come to grips with the roles played by
both sides of her family in the 1911 crimes.

**Doctor Cordelia Lochren** is Antone Coutts’s lover and the keeper of the town’s secrets. The book's final chapter, narrated by Cordelia, ultimately reveals the identity of the killer of the farm family.

**Mooshum**—whose real name is Seraph Milk—is Evelina’s Indian grandfather. He is the only one of the lynching victims to have escaped death and may or may not have had a part in the murder of the farm family.

**Billy Peace** is the nephew of Cuthbert Peace. He is a charismatic cult leader married to Marn Wolde.

**Cuthbert Peace** is the grandson of Metis Indians Henri and Lafayette Peace, who aided Joseph Coutts in his exploration of the territory. Cuthbert took part in the crimes of 1911.

**Marn Wolde** is married to Billy Peace, with whom she ran off as a young girl. She has two children and is a snake charmer.

**About the Author**

Louise Erdrich was born in Little Falls, Minnesota, in 1954. Her father, Ralph Erdrich, was German American, while her mother Rita was French and Ojibwe Indian. Her parents taught at the Bureau of Indian Affairs school in Wahpeton, North Dakota. Erdrich graduated from Dartmouth College in 1976 and earned her MA degree in creative writing from Johns Hopkins University in 1979. She published her first novel, *Love Medicine*, in 1984, after earning a reputation as a premiere American poet and short story writer.

[Image Omitted: 00263505 ]

A Native American reservation in North Dakota. The plot of *The Plague of Doves* is centered on the complicated relationship shared between the white residents of Little Falls, Minnesota, and the local Native American tribe.

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**Literary and Historical Context**

The murders and subsequent lynchings that inform the lives of the characters in Erdrich’s novel have their roots in a historical event—the 1897 killings of a farm family in Emmons County, North Dakota, and the lynching of the three Native Americans, including thirteen-year-old Paul Holy Track, who were accused but never convicted of the murders. Beyond that incident, however, lies the tragic history of indigenous North Americans following the immigration of Europeans to the continent beginning in the late fifteenth century. Early white explorers brought with them diseases against which the Indians had no immunity, and millions of them were wiped out. With the start of colonization, which was sponsored by European governments and corporations, the Indians had to fight wars for land they had occupied for centuries. Following
the American Revolution and the establishment of the United States, the “Indian problem” came to a head as the ideology of Manifest Destiny—the belief that westward expansion was inevitable and divinely ordained—took hold in government. How to remove the Native Americans from their land and assimilate them into the white culture, or failing assimilation, eliminate them altogether, was a major political and ethical issue for the new government, beginning with President George Washington (1732-1799), whose intentions regarding the Indians were honest but ultimately meaningless in the face of opposition. In the 1820s the tribes signed a number of treaties with the government agreeing to give up their land in the southeastern states in exchange for land in the western portion of the continent. Most remained on their own land, however, and those who relocated did so voluntarily. Then in 1830 President Andrew Jackson (1767-1845) signed into law the Indian Removal Act, which gave the U.S. government the power to forcibly move Indians from their lands east of the Mississippi River to an established Indian territory in the current location of the state of Oklahoma. Between 1831 and 1837 an estimated forty-six thousand Indians from the Seminole, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Cherokee nations were relocated from their homes in the southeast. The Cherokee were the last to leave, forced out by the terms of an illegal treaty, in an exodus that came to be known as the Trail of Tears because disease and starvation killed four thousand of them along the way.

Westward expansion of white settlers continued through the nineteenth century, and by 1851 conflicts between whites and Indians had arisen in the resettled areas of modern-day Oklahoma. In response, Congress passed the Indian Appropriations Act, which allotted parcels of land, called reservations, to native tribes. In the 1860s the reservations were overseen by religious leaders in an effort to “Christianize” the Indians. Over the decades various plans were conceived and laws passed to manage the legal and ethical issues brought about by the reservation system, but none could alter the fact of the near-genocide of the indigenous peoples. In the twentieth century reservations became known for rampant unemployment, high rates of infant and child mortality, alcoholism, intimate partner violence, and abject poverty.

Themes

The metaphor that structures the entire novel is the plague of doves from the book’s title, which Erdrich uses to comment on innocence, purity, and holiness gone awry. Ron Hall, editor of Washington Post Book World, noted in his review, “The tale of a dove infestation in 1896—which gives the novel its title—reads like a Native American twist on Alfred Hitchcock, the lovely birds accumulating until they become grotesque.” Hall goes on to observe, “Hovering over the entire novel is the image of those voracious doves, covering the ground, blanketing everything, consuming everything in a fluttering wave of white feathers.” Margaret Noori also comments on the significance of the doves in her review for the Women’s Review of Books, relating the “plague” ultimately to the takeover of Indian land by whites: “The doves … are simultaneously historical realities, biblical signs, and political nightmares. Like the locusts that plagued Egypt, the birds—actually now-extinct passenger pigeons—descended in 1896 on the North Dakota town of Pluto. A biblical dove can be a sign of peace or of the Holy Ghost, and a flock is a message from God. Yet all that blaneness descending on Chippewa reservation farmland, hungry and destructive, is also a metaphor for the myth of manifest destiny.”
Erdrich’s other major theme in *Plague of Doves* is that the past is connected inexorably to the present, and vice versa. Ann Harleman references the predicament of one of the book’s main narrators, Evelina Harp, who has both white and Native ancestors who played roles in the 1911 lynching, in her review in the *Boston Globe*: “Evelina is descended from both the wrongly accused and the accusers. Her beloved grandfather, Mooshum, was the only one of the four to survive the lynching; her father’s adoptive father was one of the lynchers. How do individuals—how does a community—absorb such contradictions? How do we live in the present without being destroyed by the past?” Harleman goes on to quote Evelina as she attempts to confront the events of the past as they continue to exist in the present: “I traced the blood history of the murders through my classmates and friends until I could draw out elaborate spider webs of lines and intersecting circles.” Erdrich addresses concepts such as survivors’ guilt and scapegoating in the novel, which she has in interviews traced explicitly to the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In an interview published in the *Albany Times Union*, Erdrich said: “I think vengeance, rather than sitting back and allowing justice to be done over time, is really so much a part of our history. And unfortunately, it’s part of our present, as well. This is common after any sort of horrific event. There’s a terrible thirst for someone to blame, for someone to be caught and punished right away, and immediately. We saw that after 9/11. I felt the same thing in my own heart. … And it became twisted around until we’re in this terrible situation we are in now.”

**Style**

Many of the chapters of *The Plague of Doves* were originally published as short stories before Erdrich realized she had the makings of a novel. Because of this, the chapters are narrated by a wide variety of townspeople living in Pluto, North Dakota, and on the Ojibwe reservation over the course of the twentieth century, all of whom are in some way affected by the murders. The two primary narrators are Evelina Harp, a young woman of mixed blood who traces her family history to both sides of the lynching, and Judge Antone Bazil Coutts, a descendant of both white settlers and Indians. But more minor characters also have speaking roles, narrating their own chapters. This narrative technique illustrates Evelina Harp’s description of the town as a series of “elaborate spider webs of lines and intersecting circles.”

**Critical Reception**

*The Plague of Doves* was hailed as one of Erdrich’s best novels. Many critics favorably compared Erdrich’s writing in the book with that of William Faulkner, who was known for his complex family storylines and multiple narrators. Like Faulkner, Erdrich uses her narrative technique, according to reviewers, to create a collage-like effect and raise questions about guilt, blame, and culpability as each narrator reveals a little more about the past and present. Discussing the novel in the *Women’s Review of Books*, Margaret Noori comments on the overarching purpose of Erdrich’s lyrical intersection of past and present: “As her characters review and revisit not only their own actions but also those of everyone before and after them, [Erdrich] reminds us that although we live in a self-centered world, our selves are nothing more than bright stars, which may burn for a time, but eventually reshape themselves as part of a greater universe.” Additionally, Noori asserts, Erdrich’s exploration of the usurpation of language and land has special relevance in the twenty-first century: “Her characters confront
religious zealotry, the rights and responsibilities of citizens, the desire to avenge crimes extralegally, and the state’s right to determine sexual deviance and insanity. These are old wounds in America—wounds we still see weeping across the front pages of newspapers today.”

Works Cited


Additional Resources

Criticism and Reviews


Gale Resources


Open Web Sources

*Native Languages of the Americas*: Chippewa (Ojibway, Anishinaabe, Ojibwa) provides information on Native American tribes and languages. Web. 4 Sept. 2010. [http://www.native-languages.org/chippewa.htm](http://www.native-languages.org/chippewa.htm)
For Further Reading


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