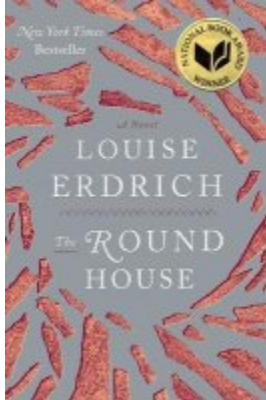


Oliver Wolcott Library
The Round House by Louise Erdrich
Book Discussion Guide
Prepared by Patricia Moore



About the Book:

One Sunday in the spring of 1988, a woman living on a reservation in North Dakota is attacked. The details of the crime are slow to surface as Geraldine Coutts is traumatized and reluctant to relive or reveal what happened, either to the police or to her husband, Bazil, and thirteen-year-old son, Joe. In one day, Joe's life is irrevocably transformed. He tries to heal his mother, but she will not leave her bed and slips into an abyss of solitude. Increasingly alone, Joe finds himself thrust prematurely into an adult world for which he is ill prepared.

While his father, who is a tribal judge, endeavors to wrest justice from a situation that defies his efforts, Joe becomes frustrated with the official investigation and sets out with his trusted friends, Cappy, Zack, and Angus, to get some answers of his own. Their quest takes them first to the Round House, a sacred space and place of worship for the Ojibwe. And this is only the beginning.

Written with undeniable urgency, and illuminating the harsh realities of contemporary life in a community where Ojibwe and white live uneasily together, *The Round House* is a brilliant and entertaining novel, a masterpiece of literary fiction. Louise Erdrich embraces tragedy, the comic, a spirit world very much present in the lives of her all-too-human characters, and a tale of injustice that is, unfortunately, an authentic reflection of what happens in our own world today.

Source: HarperCollins.com (USA)

About the Author:

Louise Erdrich is the author of thirteen novels as well as volumes of poetry, short stories, children's books, and a memoir of early motherhood. Her novel *Love Medicine* won the National Book Critics Circle Award. *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* was a finalist for the National Book Award. Most recently, *The Plague of Doves* won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Louise Erdrich lives in Minnesota and is the owner of Birchbark Books, an independent bookstore.

Source: HarperCollins.com (USA)

Book Reviews:

“Erdrich skillfully makes Joe’s coming-of-age both universal and specific...the story is also ripe with detail about reservation life, and with her rich cast of characters, Erdrich provides flavor, humor and depth. Joe’s relationship with his father, Bazil, a judge, has echoes of TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD.” — *Library Journal, Starred Review of THE ROUND HOUSE*

“Emotionally compelling...Joe is an incredibly endearing narrator, full of urgency and radiant candor...the story he tells transforms a sad, isolated crime into a revelation about how maturity alters our relationship with our parents, delivering us into new kinds of love and pain.” — *Ron Charles, Washington Post*

“Wise and suspenseful...Erdrich’s voice as well as her powers of insight and imagination fully infuse this novel...She writes so perceptively and brilliantly about the adolescent passion for justice that one is transported northward to her home territory.” — *Chicago Tribune*

“Erdrich has given us a multitude of narrative voices and stories. Never before has she given us a novel with a single narrative voice so smart, rich and full of surprises as she has in *The Round House*...and, I would argue, her best so far.” — *NPR/All Thing's Considered*

Discussion Questions:

1. The Round House opens with the sentence: “Small trees had attacked my parents’ house at the foundation.” How do these words relate to the complete story that unfolds?
2. Though he is older as he narrates the story, Joe is just thirteen when the novel opens. What is the significance of his age? How does that impact the events that occur and his actions and reactions?
3. Describe Joe’s family, and his relationship with his parents. In talking about his parents, Joe says, “I saw myself as different, though I didn’t know how yet.” Why, at thirteen, did he think this? Do you think the grown-up Joe narrating the story still believes this?
4. Joe’s whole family is rocked by the attack on his mother. How does it affect the relationship between his mother and father, and between him and his mother? Does it alter Joe’s view of them? Can trauma force a child to grow up “overnight”? What impact does it have on Joe? How does it transform his family?
5. “My mother’s job was to know everybody’s secrets,” Joe tells us. How does this knowledge empower Geraldine and how does it make her life more difficult?
6. Joe is inseparable from his three friends, especially his best friend, Cappy. Talk about their bond. How does their closeness influence unfolding events?
7. What is the significance of the Round House? What is the importance of the Obijwe legends that are scattered through the novel? How do they reflect and deepen the main story? What can we learn from the old ways of people like the Ojibwe? Is Joe proud of his heritage? Discuss the connection between the natural and animal world and the tribe’s spirituality.

8. After the attack, Joe's mother, Geraldine, isn't sure exactly where it happened, whether it was technically on Reservation land or not. How does the legal relationship between the U.S. and the Ojibwe complicate the investigation? Why can't she lie to make it easier?

9. Secondary characters, including Mooshum, Linda Wishkob, Sonja, Whitey, Clemence, and Father Travis, play indelible roles in the central story. Talk about their interactions with Joe and his friends and parents. What do their stories tell about the wider world of the reservation and about relations between white and Native Americans?

10. Towards the novel's climax, Father Travis tells Joe, "in order to purify yourself, you have to understand yourself. Everything out in the world is also in you. Good, bad, evil, perfection, death, everything. So we study our souls." Would you say this is a good characterization of humanity? How is each of these things visible in Joe's personality?

11. He also tells Joe about the different types of evil --- the material version, which we cannot control, and the moral one, which is harm deliberately caused by humans. How does this knowledge influence Joe?

12. When Joe makes his fateful decision concerning his mother's attacker, he says it is about justice, not vengeance. What do you think? How does that decision change him? Why doesn't he share the information he has with the people who love him?

13. What do you think about the status of Native Americans? Should we have reservations in modern America? How does the Reservation preserve their heritage and culture and how does it set them apart from their fellow Americans?

14. Could the American West have been settled without the conflicts between white Europeans and native peoples? Do you think we, as Americans, have changed significantly today?

15. We hear a great deal about reparations and atonement for slavery. What about America's history with the Native American population --- should these same issues be raised? Racism is often seen in terms of black and white. How does this view impact prejudices against others who aren't white, including people like the Ojibwe? Do you think there is prejudice against Native Americans? How is this portrayed in the book? Contrast these with examples of kindness and fairness.

16. "My father remembered that of course an Ojibwe person's clan meant everything at one time, and no one didn't have a clan; thus, you know your place in the world and your relationship to all other beings." How has modernity --- and westward expansion --- transformed this? Has our rush to the future, and our restless need to move, impacted us as a society and as individuals?

17. Race, politics, injustice, religion, superstition, magic, and the boundary between childhood and adulthood are explored in *The Round House*. Choose a theme or two and trace how it is demonstrated in a character's life throughout the novel.

18. The only thing that God can do, and does all the time, is to draw good from any evil situation," the priest advised Joe. What good does Joe --- and also his family --- draw from the events of the summer? What life lessons did Joe learn that summer of 1988?

Further Reading:

Caramelo by Sandra Cisneros

Every year, Ceyala "Lala" Reyes' family--aunts, uncles, mothers, fathers, and Lala's six older brothers--packs up three cars and, in a wild ride, drive from Chicago to the Little Grandfather and Awful Grandmother's house in Mexico City for the summer. Struggling to find a voice above the boom of her brothers and to understand her place on this side of the border and that, Lala is a shrewd observer of family life. But when she starts telling the Awful Grandmother's life story, seeking clues to how she got to be so awful, grandmother accuses Lala of exaggerating. Soon, a multigenerational family narrative turns into a whirlwind exploration of storytelling, lies, and life.

The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven by Sherman Alexie

In this darkly comic collection, Alexie brilliantly weaves memory, fantasy, and stark realism to paint a complex, grimly ironic portrait of life in and around the Spokane Indian Reservation. These twenty-two interlinked tales are narrated by characters raised on humiliation and government-issue cheese, and yet are filled with passion and affection, myth and dream. Against a backdrop of alcohol, car accidents, laughter, and basketball, Alexie depicts the distances between Indians and whites, reservation Indians and urban Indians, men and women, and, most poetically, modern Indians and the traditions of the past.

Pigs in Heaven: A Novel by Barbara Kingsolver

Simplicity is gone forever when Taylor and Turtle (who is Cherokee) appear on TV by a coincidence of fate, and come to the attention of Annawake Fourkiller, a lawyer for the Cherokee nation. Taylor finds herself in a conflict between her own and what she thinks of as Turtle's best interests, and those of the tribe. Citing the Indian Welfare Act, which states that all adoptions of Native American children must be authorized by their tribes, Annawake determines to try to invalidate Turtle's adoption. Along the way to resolution of this seemingly irresolvable conflict, many lives are changed.

The Plague of Doves by Louise Erdrich

Part Ojibwe, part white, Evelina Harp is an ambitious young girl prone to falling hopelessly in love. Mooshum, Evelina's grandfather, is a repository of family and tribal history with an all-too-intimate knowledge of the violent past. And Judge Antone Basil Coutts, who bears witness, understands the weight of historical injustice better than anyone. Through the distinct and winning voices of three unforgettable narrators, the collective stories of two interwoven communities ultimately come together to reveal a final wrenching truth.

The Song of the Lark by Willa Cather

This is Cather's coming-of-age classic---the story of a young artist who leaves the mediocrity of her home town to seek fame and success in the big city. A bittersweet reflection on severing oneself from one's past relationships and surroundings, *The Song of the Lark* explores the loss that ultimately accompanies an artist's highest achievements.

Strange as this Weather Has Been by Ann Pancake

Set in present day West Virginia, Ann Pancake's debut novel, *Strange As This Weather Has Been*, tells the story of a coal mining family—a couple and their four children—living through the latest mining boom and dealing with the mountaintop removal and strip mining that is ruining what is left of their mountain life. As the mine turns the mountains to slag and wastewater, workers struggle with layoffs and children find adventure in the blasted moonscape craters.

~This book discussion guide including the further reading recommendation list was prepared by the Oliver Wolcott Library.