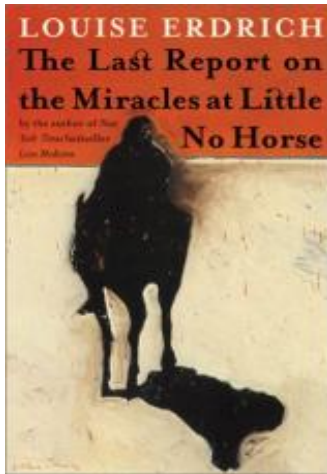

The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse

by Louise Erdrich



About the Book

For more than a half century, Father Damien Modeste has served his beloved people, the Ojibwe, on the remote reservation of Little No Horse. Compelled to his task by a direct mystical experience, Father Damien has made enormous sacrifices, and experienced the joys of commitment as well as deep suffering. Now, nearing the end of his life, Father Damien dreads the discovery of his physical identity, for he is a woman who has lived as a man. He imagines the undoing of all that he has accomplished -- sees unions unsundered, baptisms nullified, those who confessed to him once again unforgiven. To complicate his fears, his quiet life changes when a troubled colleague comes to the reservation to investigate the life of the perplexing, difficult, possibly false saint Sister Leopolda. Father Damien alone knows the strange truth of Sister Leopolda's piety, but these facts are bound up in his own secret. In relating his history and that of Leopolda, whose wonder working is documented but inspired, he believes, by a capacity for evil rather than the love of good, Father Damien is forced to choose: Should he reveal all he knows and risk everything? Or should he manufacture a protective history? In spinning out the tale of his life, Father Damien in fact does both. His story encompasses his life as a young woman, her passions, and the pestilence, tribal hatreds, and sorrows passed from generation to generation of Ojibwe. From the fantastic truth of Father Damien's origin as a woman to the hilarious account of the absurd demise of Nanapush, his best friend on the reservation, his story ranges over the span of the century.

In a masterwork that both deepens and enlarges the world of her previous novels set on the same reservation, Louise Erdrich captures the essence of a time and the spirit of a woman who felt compelled by her beliefs to serve her people as a priest. *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* is a work of an avid heart, a writer's writer, and a storytelling genius.

Discussion Guide

1. Do you find Father Damien to be an attractive character? If so, why? Does it bother you that he is an impostor, a thief,

a liar? Does it bother you that he spends money on a piano rather than on some other cause? He easily forgives others their sins, but can we forgive him that he has an affair with another priest?

2. The novel invites comparisons between Leopolda and Damien. Make lists of some of their similarities and differences. Does Erdrich seem to want us to favor one over the other, or is she making through the strangeness of both of them a comment about the "miracles" of Catholicism?

3. Father Damien goes to Little No Horse to convert the Ojibwe to Catholicism. By the end of the book has he nearly become converted to the very paganism he set out to replace?

4. What do you make of the black dog that hounds Father Damien? Is it the devil? Does it really speak? Is it evidence that Damien is insane? Why did Erdrich risk having us even ask that last question by including the dog in the first place? If it is a devil who tempts Father Damien in the wilderness, does Damien become some sort of a Christ figure?

5. Consider the various meanings of "passion" in this novel? Why does Erdrich use the word so often? What do you make of the implied allusion to the passion of Christ-or do you see no such implication?

6. In this novel a very passionate woman spends most of her life impersonating a man. Along the way she becomes aware of certain ways that men typically behave, as well as how they are typically treated by others. Is there a message here about male-female roles and attitudes? Does Erdrich's use of both genders of pronoun (he/she, etc.) to refer to Father Damien confuse you, or does it make sense in the context of the story?

7. In this novel more than any previous one, Erdrich gives untranslated words, phrases, and even sentences in the Ojibwe language. Why does she do this? Is it effective? Can you usually figure out from the context what the words, phrases, and sentences mean?

8. Do you find Nanapush to be as attractive a character as Father Damien does? Is he, like his namesake Nanabozho, a trickster figure of mythological proportions, or is he just a funny, oversexed, foolish, and sometimes wise old man? How would you compare his sexuality with that of Father Damien?

9. What are we to make of the Pope's failure to reply to any of Father Damien's letters during his lifetime? What are we to make of the Pope's willingness to write at the end of the novel after Father Damien is dead? Does this last make the novel feel more like comedy or tragedy? That is, does the final fax give the novel a happy or sad ending?

Author Bio

Louise Erdrich, a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, is the award-winning author of many novels, as well as volumes of poetry, children's books and a memoir of early motherhood. Erdrich lives in Minnesota with her daughters and is the owner of Birchbark Books, a small independent bookstore.

Critical Praise

"Erdrich seems to be inhabiting her characters, so intense and viscerally rendered are her portrayals...This novel will be remembered for a cornucopia of set pieces, all bizarre and stunning...Erdrich has done justice to the complexities of existence in general and Native American life in particular. "

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