
Louise Erdrich. *The Sentence*. HarperCollins, 2021. 386 pp. ISBN: 978147215699.

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Cracking open a novel by Louise Erdrich has always meant entering a rich world populated with complicated characters who share witty banter as they build, explore, test, and cultivate their communities. Achieving justice, exploring Indigenous identity, and finding one's way as a mixedblood individual are common themes of Erdrich's novels, and *The Sentence* (2021) is no exception. What sets *The Sentence* apart from Erdrich's other novels, however, is its relative temporal immediacy to the atrocities – and the haunting histories they expose – that Erdrich depicts and centres as the tension of her work. Set in 2019-2020 Minneapolis, Minnesota, *The Sentence* follows bookseller Tookie, her husband Pollux, stepdaughter Hetta, and Tookie's friends and co-workers from Birchbark Books, Louise Erdrich's real-life independent bookstore. Together, they navigate the explosion of social, economic, political, and racial tensions that erupted with the rise of the pandemic and then the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin, sparking protests nationwide against police brutality. Amidst all this external chaos, Tookie is also being haunted by the ghost of a 'Wannabe Indian' bookstore customer, Flora, who suddenly died after reading a particular sentence from a hand-written diary entitled: "The Sentence, An Indian Captivity, 1862 – 1883" (71).

Thus, the mystery of why Flora died haunts Birchbark Books, and Tookie in particular, underpins all the material chaos of the pandemic and the reaction against police brutality in Tookie's life. In fact, the inadequate governmental response to the pandemic and the horrors of police brutality are framed as manifestations of Minneapolis' haunting history of colonialism. In this way, the entire novel is a ghost story, not just about an individual haunting, but the haunting quality of colonialism in mainstream American discourse. Imagining the potential identities of the Indigenous woman who wrote the eponymous diary, "The Sentence," and the number of atrocities she could have encountered, Tookie reflects:

Like every state in our country, Minnesota began with blood and dispossession and enslavement [...] Our history makes us. Sometimes I think our state's beginning years haunt everything: the city's attempts to graft progressive ideas

onto its racist origins, the fact that we can't undo history but are forced to either confront or repeat it. (72)

The Sentence, then, is clearly interested in the material effects of colonial haunting and how they manifest in the American justice system as police brutality, vigilante justice, Indigenous resistance, or carceral punishment.

Building on the theme of justice is Erdrich's choice of the title, *The Sentence*. The title takes on a trickster quality, resistant as it is to singular, absolute definition. There is, of course, the diary "The Sentence"; there is also the sentence which killed Flora *within* "The Sentence." There are watchword phrases chanted as part of the police protests, like "I can't breathe" and "Abolish the police" (253 – 254). There is also "sentence" in the sense of a punishment for person convicted by the US court system – a meaning to which Tookie has intimate connection as she spent ten years in prison. There is also the love of sentences and books in general, which Tookie discovers while in prison. When reading a dictionary, she looks up the definition of the word "sentence" and finds as examples "*The door is open. Go! They were the most beautiful sentences ever written*" (24). Like the haunting history of colonialism, the myriad meanings of "sentence" affect Tookie's self-understanding and identity as she is forced to grapple with her own memories of incarceration. Furthermore, Tookie's husband, Pollux, is an ex-tribal cop and is, in fact, the person who arrested her, leading to her decade-long incarceration, most of which was in solitary confinement.

A fascination with justice and memory is, unsurprisingly, found over and over again in Indigenous literature. Hauntings and the memories they invoke of lived colonial atrocities illuminate and complicate understandings of identity and "what it means to be Indian." The intersection of memory, haunting, and justice are central pillars in Erdrich's Justice Trilogy (2008, 2012, 2016) and *Tracks* (1988), as well as Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead: A Novel* (1991), Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer* (1996), Martin Cruz Smith's *Nightwing* (1977), and Stephen Graham Jones' *Mapping the Interior* (2017), to name just a few examples. In these stories, it is common for ghosts to be both materially and psychologically manifested. For example, Mooshum in *The Plague of Doves* serves as a living reminder of the three other Anishinaabeg men who were murdered by a lynch mob when he was a young man; their ghosts follow him, and it is impossible for him to fully escape his association with these dead men. Similarly, the killer in *Indian Killer* retains both corporeal and incorporeal qualities that allow

them to commit and then escape from murders that are committed ostensibly in revenge for colonisation.

The hauntings in *The Sentence* share these psychological-yet-material qualities. On the one hand, ghosts like Flora can influence the physical world which leads to a psychological reckoning and change at the individual level. At the same time, the haunting memories of colonial violence manifest in the figure of Derek Chauvin-as-murderer, so, while George Floyd is not a ghost in the same manner as Flora, his memory influences the masses to enact – or try to enact – material change in the form of protests for police reform. The multiple layers of haunting, like the multiple layers of the meaning of the title, keep Erdrich's exploration of how the past influences the future fresh in the mind of the reader. One is left with the impression that if Flora was missing from the narrative, the novel could come off as moralistic or even exploitative of the George Floyd tragedy, while if the novel was set in a time period that did not include the mayhem of 2020 Minneapolis, it would risk becoming a stale restatement of Erdrich's previous works that also are concerned with justice and identity. Therefore, while Erdrich's use of ghostliness and its connection to injustice in 21st-century United States is not new, *The Sentence* remains relevant and fresh.

In an interview with Neal Bowers and Charles L. P. Silet, Gerald Vizenor described the process of survivance as being akin to balancing in a canoe: "I don't mean balance in a political sense, but balance in a symbolic healing sense [...] You have to stay alive, and if you're tipping in your goddamn canoe, you seek the balance. You don't know in advance what structure works: you have to seek balance that'll keep the thing afloat" (49). Ultimately, *The Sentence* is a ghost story about how, after experiencing and confronting trauma, Tookie and her loved ones find empowerment and self-discovery through this process of seeking balance. As is also common in Erdrich's works, Indigenous identity is not prescriptive, and every character comes to find their peace in different ways: Pollux through traditional arts and ceremony; Hetta through participating in protests; Asema the bookkeeper through protest but also through academic research into history; and Louise Erdrich, who is a character herself, through writing. *The Sentence* continues the common thread in Erdrich's works that memory and the confrontation of the past is the key to finding this balance.

Tookie, however, resists memory at first, largely because of the trauma of her childhood and incarceration. As the turmoil in Minneapolis grows, however, so too

does Flora's power, forcing Tookie to confront that which she would prefer remains buried. Once again connecting the material to interiority, the narrative voice reflects, "Something in the diseased air, something in the trauma of the greater conversation, something in the ache of the unknown [...] was giving her [Flora] more power" (188). Erdrich connects the individual haunting of the fictional Tookie by the fictional Flora to the greater haunting of the real United States and to the *need* to remember in order to find balance. Again, confronting the past and making peace with it in order to find happiness as a colonised individual is a common outcome of Erdrich's novels. However, that these characters are able to find a balance in one of the most chaotic and uncertain times in modern American history – and that their peace is hopeful rather than gimmicky – is remarkable in and of itself.

This is a great strength of *The Sentence*. Although it tackles some of the most polarising cultural moments of our times, it is not prescriptive or didactic in its response to these moments. Erdrich's characters experience real pain in response to the traumas of 2020 Minneapolis, and all the characters' disparate responses to these traumas are given the complex space they need in order to articulate their places within this trauma. For example, Pollux is an ex-tribal cop and complicit in Tookie's incarceration. However, in addition to being Tookie's husband and her strongest support for the majority of the novel, he also volunteers to help his community by participating in food drives and helping to defend against looters during the riots in Minneapolis. Pollux is also haunted by what he calls a "crooked thing," which are the memories of some of the horrible events he saw and experienced during his time on the force (283). The narrator observes, "Pollux had known good people, seen lives saved by his fellow patrol officers. So who was doing the beating [...] How was it that protests against police violence showed how violence police really were?" (284). In raising questions, rather than providing answers, Erdrich shows the complexities of finding the balance of which Vizenor speaks when an Indigenous person has participated in a colonial arm of the state. Unlike, say, Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* which can read as totalising and essentialist regarding Indigenous participation in colonialism, Erdrich resists painting Pollux as a reactionary symbol of the evils of the police, and therefore avoids prescriptive answers to difficult and life-altering socio-political problems.

This is just one example of how Erdrich capably reflects what it means to be haunted, materially and psychologically, by the effects of colonisation in the 21st century. For this reason, readers for whom Erdrich's historical works are just a bit too temporally distant

to be explicitly linked to more contemporary discourses, like the movement to abolish police and the reaction against the rise of the far-right in mainstream American politics, will likely find *The Sentence* a relevant and engaging read. At the same time, readers who enjoy how Erdrich engages with questions of injustice and identity will find nothing new in the philosophical underpinnings of *The Sentence* but will still be able to enjoy the rich characters and communal landscapes for which Erdrich is known. In essence, while not ground-breaking in its use of ghosts to highlight colonial trauma or the ways in which her characters confront this trauma, it is difficult not to be spellbound by Erdrich's prose and nigh impossible to not fall in love with Tookie, Pollux, and their tightly knit, deeply devoted community.

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