



Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country

Louise Erdrich

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For more than twenty years Louise Erdrich has dazzled readers with the intricately wrought, deeply poetic novels which have won her a place among today's finest writers. Her nonfiction is equally eloquent, and this lovely memoir offers a vivid glimpse of the landscape, the people, and the long tradition of storytelling that give her work its magical, elemental force.

In a small boat like those her Native American ancestors have used for countless generations, she travels to Ojibwe home ground, the islands of Lake of the Woods in southern Ontario. Her only companions are her new baby and the baby's father, an Ojibwe spiritual leader, on a pilgrimage to the sacred rock paintings their people have venerated for centuries as mystical "teaching and dream guides," and where even today Ojibwe leave offerings of tobacco in token of their power. With these paintings as backdrop, Erdrich summons to life the Ojibwe's spirits and songs, their language and sorrows, and the tales that are in their blood, echoing through her own family's very contemporary American lives and shaping her vision of the wider world. Thoughtful, moving, and wonderfully well observed, her meditation evokes ancient wisdom, modern ways, and the universal human concerns we all share.

"This book is a treasure and a delight."—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

From the Trade Paperback edition.

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From Reader Review Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country for online ebook

Patricia says

Cogent meditation on culture and language to stretch the heart and mind! An island of books! I wish I hadn't taken it back to the library today so I could go back and live in the book again now.

Catherine Newell says

As someone recently remarked on a fantastic hour of the NPR show 1A -- in an episode devoted to romance novels (which I don't read, but really: it was a wonderful episode!) -- "The world is a dumpster fire and sometimes we just need something with a happy ending." Or words to that effect. While this book doesn't have an ending, *per se*, it gave me that same sense of lightness and joy.

Books, indeed!

I am so grateful to have fanned out across the Lake of the Woods with Erdrich and her family, to have seen the waters, the forests, the ancient figures painted on the ageless granite, the island of thousands of books. She's right about the power of books, the healing nature of stories, the way wilderness knits a fractured self back into a whole person. And now, besides a few hours in her bookstore, I want more than anything to spend a week on Mallard Island, with Oberholtzer's books: reading, swimming, listening to stories, and letting my brain rewire.

Booklunatic says

4 Sterne

Hat mir gut gefallen. Man erfährt viel über indianische Bräuche und immer wieder schimmert Erdrichs große Liebe zu den Büchern durch den Text. Auf die Bücher-Insel würde ich auch gerne mal! Über Erdrichs Buchladen hätte ich gerne mehr gelesen. Etwas schade fand ich, dass es keinen Bildteil zu ihrer Reise gab - wo doch sogar erwähnt wird, dass sie die Felsmalereien fotografiert hat.

Dorothea says

I had never read anything by Louise Erdrich before, but I knew right away, from the first paragraph --

My travels have become so focused on books and islands that the two have merged for me. Books, islands. Islands, books. Lake of the Woods in Ontario and Minnesota has 14,000 islands. Some of them are painted islands, the rocks bearing signs ranging from a few hundred to more than a thousand years old. So these islands, which I'm longing to read, are books in themselves...

--that I had to read *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country*.

Some other reviewers on Goodreads (perhaps with different expectations, from having read Erdrich's novels?) were disappointed with this book; they said it was about trivial things. Well, it's a short read, if you like, and Erdrich uses an easy, chatty style, and it's about a woman going sight-seeing with her baby. It is also about, among other things:

- + How to prepare physically and psychologically for going on a journey
- + What books are for
- + The coexistence of land and human history
- + What babies are for
- + The language one grows up speaking and the language one hears only in prayers and the language one strives desperately to learn as an adult
- + How to return from a journey

It is a short book and there's a lot in it, and I think when I read it again -- maybe on an island, maybe when I'm forty-eight -- I will find it just as deep and clear and satisfying.

Carla says

I bought this signed copy at Louise Erdrich's bookstore as a treasured gift. It was a book that my husband read before I got a chance to read it! This despite the fact I have read so many of her books, but I had not read this. It was a beautifully written journey into Northern Minnesota, a baby in tow, discovering pictured rocks, and Ojibwe history. You need to read this to appreciate all the lore that Louise Erdrich brings to her writing, and the parts she shares with readers about herself. Very moving.

Vel Veeter says

I am not sure I would recommend this book to someone as a starter for Louise Erdrich. I do think I would recommend it as an interesting journey around upper Minnesota/southern Ontario/Manitoba. And I would definitely recommend it to someone seeing a somewhat more open side of Erdrich.

In this short travel narrative, Louise Erdrich travels around the physical terrain of Ojibwe Country at the intersection of Manitoba, Minnesota, and Ontario, but also in the more metaphysical world of history, language, and literature. She ruminates on the Ojibwe language that she didn't start learning until adulthood, as her grandfather was the last speaker that she knew of, she thinks about the literature that she has brought with her on her trip as well as the literature that inspired her to ask questions about the land around her and her history. She thinks about her newly born daughter (born in 2001-02 to a 47 year old mother, something she also thinks about at length). She thinks about her forebears, both her Ojibwe and German sides, and she thinks about the nature of Lakes, Islands, Books, Travel, and Family.

Because the structure of this book drifts, as does the writing, the thinking and the subject matter, it's not a very pinned down experience. This isn't the kind of travel narrative that you could track on a map, and if you could, I don't know that it would be that interesting to see it this way. Not only is the physical space she travels not that large, she goes by minivan.

This is the most personal book of hers I have read. It's open about her family, her personal life, her intellectual life. It's also the most researched and direct about her Ojibwe identity. Her novels often deal with characters who seem unstuck in history because of the cultural violence they are party to, or they are the survivors of a destroyed history, who live the experience, but might not have access to learn more about the histories they occupy. As an educated, independent woman in 2003, Louise Erdrich does have that access, and it's on display in this short text.

Here's what it sounds like:

"As I was living in New Hampshire at the time, my only recourse was to use a set of Ojibwe language tapes made by Basil Johnson, the distinguished Canadian Ojibwe writer. Unknown to Basil Johnson, he became my friend. His patient Anishinaabe voice reminded me of my grandfather's and of the kindest of elders. Basil and I conversed in the isolation of my car as I dropped off and picked up children, bought groceries, navigated tangled New England roads. I carried my tapes everywhere I went. The language bit deep into my heart, but I could only go so long talking with Basil on a tape. I longed for a real community. At last, when I moved to Minnesota, I met fellow Ojibwe people who were embarked on what seems a quixotic enterprise—learning one of the toughest languages ever invented."

There was a recent scandal with a Canadian writer who claims Native ancestry but whose claims are treated with some suspicion by various groups. I ended up doing some light research on Erdrich to make sure I wasn't hitching myself up for more disappointment. She seems to be the kind of conscientious, thoughtful person she comes off as, and I am glad. She has done a lot of wonderful work that adds depth to many of her novels, and to how I think of her as a writer.

Kate McCartney says

Erdrich takes a journey out of love of books and her people. An incredible journey through a region I didn't even know about and its importance to a people almost all but physically removed from it. The treatment of the First Nations through Canada and the United States is tragic.

Another book I may not have gotten around to reading if not for the Read Harder Challenge.

2017 Read Harder Challenge- Read a book about books

Mary Waugaman says

This book is excellent for anyone who wants to know more about the craft of storytelling and the mechanics of language. The author tells us the story of her pilgrimage to an island dedicated to books. As she travels she reveals her perspective of literature and the story of her people, the Ojibwe. She encapsulates her journey so well you can almost trick yourself into believing you've been to the island too. Thank you, Louise Erdrich.

Mmars says

Really 3.5 stars. Somewhere on Rainy Lake, which borders Minnesota and Canada and reaches further north into the wilderness, there is one island among 1600 that has on it over 10,000 books. An Ojibwe bibliophile collected these over the course of a long life. Now, if you've ever paddled in the Boundary Waters Wilderness, or if you ever do, think about that. The is very harsh country. Winters can be bitterly cold and snowy and summers are often wet and rarely overly hot. It's also quite beautiful and still pristine. Very few visitors are allowed to visit the island, but Louise Erdrich is one who has that opportunity and she shares that in this brief treatise that interconnects the Ojibwe culture, islands and books.

As part of the National Geographic Directions series, this is in a sense a travel book, but not in the traditional sense. Louise Erdrich is 47 years old, has an 18-month-old daughter (her fourth) and she and the baby take a vacation to visit the baby's father and the island of the books. She writes, in what feels to be more of an exercise than a polished work. But that's okay. Her topics are interesting and well-relayed to the reader. The Ojibwe language, rock paintings, medicinal plants, and books and their collector are covered. She ties the theme of the book together nicely. Upon arriving home she realizes her bookstore is near what is known as the "Lake of the Isles" in Minneapolis.

This is an interesting little comfort read for by the lakeside or in front of a crackling fire. Recommended to Erdrich fans.

Sarah Rigg says

Part of a National Geographic literary travel book series, this is an account of traveling to Lake in the Woods in Minnesota and Canada, visiting the rock paintings of the Ojibwe tribe with her baby and the baby's father. These paintings are like "books" to the Ojibwe. She also visits a museum made of the library of an white man who loved native culture and collected many books and about natives. It's very much a meditation both on place and about the importance of books. A delightful book from a book lover.

Jaime Morse says

It's hard to reduce the intimately personal interest from this book so I'll make the most of this **VERY FIRST REVIEW** for #TheScript.

Well-known and prolific #Ojibway #German author, #LouiseErdrich employs a smooth and easy-going style of writing. #Erdrich can make the most mundane seem interesting and the most intimate moments near tangible. Her writing is captivating in a way that curiously glancing through a window during a family dinner time on your evening stroll can be. Out of basic curiosity comes cathartic gazing.

Of mixed blood heritage, in her 40's and inter generational parenting of a baby and teens at the time this was published in 2013 - I found her reflections relatable because, as a #Michif mother of 4-month-old and three teenagers, I fit all of the above. In some moments, I felt like I was peering into a glass of pure sweetness. Her description of holding the baby's foot while nursing and reading while nursing while I was nursing and reading her book made me smile. I was reading the right book! •?• As a mother she describes her explorations with her toddler, worrying about teenagers, reading, sacred paint, fasting, adoring, alcoholism, animacy in language, traditional stories, waters, islands and working on projects with her own kids.... I felt

like I was reading my own life and a passenger alongside the famous author in her trusted family minivan. ? #indigenousreads

Dan Clore says

This thin volume makes fast and fascinating reading as the author explores her ethnic background and books. Here's some quotes:

"As I stand before the painting, I come to believe that the horned figure is a self-portrait of the artist. Books. Why? So we can talk to you even though we are dead. He we are, the writer and I, regarding each other."

"Ojibwemowin is also a language of human relationships. Two-thirds of the words are verbs, and for each verb, there are countless forms. This sounds impossible, until you realize that the verb forms not only have to do with the relationships among the people conducting the action, but the precise way the action is conducted and even under what physical conditions. The blizzard of verb forms makes it an adaptive and powerfully precise language. There are lots of verbs for exactly how people shift position. Miinoshin describes how someone turns this way and that until ready to make a determined move, iskwishin how a person behaves when tired of one position and looking for one more comfortable. The best speakers are the most inventive, and come up with new words all of the time. Mookegidaazao describes the way a baby looks when outrage is building and coming to the surface where it will result in a thunderous squawl. There is a verb for the way a raven opens and shuts its claws in the cold and a verb for what would happen if a man fell off a motorcycle with a pipe in his mouth and drove the stem of it through the back of his head. There can be verb for anything."

"When it comes to nouns, there are blessedly fewer of them and no designations of gender, no feminine or masculine possessives or articles. Nouns are mainly designated as animate or inanimate, though what is alive and dead doesn't correspond at all to what an English speaker might imagine. For instance, the word for stone, asin, is animate. After all, the preexistence of the world according to Ojibwe religion consisted of a conversation between stones. People speak to and thank the stones in the sweat lodge, where the asiniig are superheated and used for healing. They are addressed as grandmothers and grandfathers."

"Would it be better to confront an ill-motived intuder who was well read, or one indifferent to literature?"

"The books we bring to strange places become guides and prevailing metaphors, catch-alls, lenses for new experiences. [...] The description of the village of Llanwyddyn, in Wales, submerged by the waters of a great reservoir, reminds me of the sensations I experience when talking to Tobasonakwut about the many settlements and cabins far out on Lake of the Woods, some of them drowned."

"I slipped it from the shelf and opened it. Tristram Shandy. One of the first novels in the English language. As it was originally published in serial form this was but a portion of the first edition and first printing. Laurence Sterne had signed the title page. I had a strange, covetous, Gollum-like feeling as I held the book, my precious. I suppose it was the beginning of the sort of emotional to books that drives those collectors you hear about, occasionally, to fill their apartments with books until there are only book tunnels to walk through and the floors eventually collapse down onto their neighbors."

"Whatever Oberholtzer's intentions were, I'm happy that his island is still filled with the books he pursued and acquired. Other than actual writing, the books a person leaves behind reflect most accurately the cast of

that person's mind."

Lynn says

This is another book I can't really describe - perhaps the non-fiction equivalent to *If on a Winter's Night*, though not nearly as strange. It's almost a thought journal, with observations on motherhood and riding in a canoe, on driving an old and beloved vehicle, on reading and wood ticks and the peculiar joys of Anishinaabemowin. It reads as if free-form, but it's clearly thought out and organised. If you're interested at all in the culture and language of the Ojibwe or the northern woods, you should enjoy it. I did.

Ann says

This memoir transported me to places I would love to visit.

And I feel like I have with the wisdom and knowledge to have some understanding of the painted rocks and the messages they still share hundreds or thousands of years later.

I particularly connected to the Ojibwe tradition of storytelling and was absolutely amazed by the wealth of the language. A language you could learn all your life and never completely conquer.

Erdrich's travels with her small daughter from island to island and her observations of the wild life and the scenery captivated me completely.

She was so privileged to visit Ernest Oberholtzer's wondrous island of books and I was privileged to learn of such a place.

Her discussions about books inspired me.

So much delight in so few pages!

Ron says

A good one-day read. Based on Erdrich's trip to islands in Lake of the Woods (northern Minnesota and southern Ontario), especially the island where the Ernest Oberholtzer foundation is located. Oberholtzer was a friend of nature and the Ojibwe people. At his death, he left behind a large book collection that Erdrich introduces to us. In addition, she gives us interesting commentary on Ojibwe rock art, language, and culture throughout the book. One of my favorite examples is her discussion of terms of farewell in Ojibwe. She mentions that for her people "goodbye" is "too final," so instead they have invented terms like "weweni babamanadis, which translates roughly as an admonition to be careful as you go around being ugly in your ugly life." The narrative, published by National Geographic, is a travel memoir and, as such, is rather light reading: interesting topics but no deep treatment of anything. Since the Oberholtzer library is constructed as the goal of the trip, one wishes for extensive treatment of that portion of the trip.

