

SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

Disturbing the Spirits

'The Round House,' by Louise Erdrich

By MARIA RUSSO OCT. 12, 2012

Law is meant to put out society's brush fires, but in Native American history it has often acted more like the wind. Louise Erdrich turns this dire reality into a powerful human story in her new novel, in which a Native American woman is raped somewhere in the vicinity of a sacred round house, and seeking justice becomes almost as devastating as the crime. The round house itself stands on reservation land, where tribal courts are in charge, but the suspect is white, and tribal courts can't prosecute non-Native people. Federal law would also seem to apply, but the rape may have taken place on a strip of land that is part of a state park, where North Dakota's authority is in force, or on another that was sold by the tribe and is thus considered "fee land," administered under a separate tangle of statutes.

When he hears that the judge handling the case is uncertain whether the accused man can be charged at all, the 13-year-old boy whose mother was raped pursues his own quest for justice. Narrating this gripping story years later, having himself become a public prosecutor, Joe shows how a seemingly isolated crime has many roots. In the process, this young boy will experience a heady jolt of adolescent freedom and a brutal introduction to both the sorrows of grown-up life and the weight of his people's past — "the gut kick of our history, which I was bracing to absorb."

“The Round House” represents something of a departure for Erdrich, whose past novels of Indian life have usually relied on a rotating cast of narrators, a kind of storytelling chorus. Here, though, Joe is the only narrator, and the urgency of his account gives the action the momentum and tight focus of a crime novel, which, in a sense, it is. But for Erdrich, “The Round House” is also a return to form. Joe’s voice — at times lawyerly, ruefully reviewing the many legal limbos of Native American history, but also searching, attuned to the subtleties of his own and others’ internal lives — recalls that of Judge Antone Bazil Coutts, one of the narrators of Erdrich’s masterly novel “The Plague of Doves.” That’s appropriate because Joe is the judge’s son.

In “The Round House,” Erdrich has come back once again to her own indelible Yoknapatawpha, a fictional North Dakota Indian reservation and its surrounding towns, with their intricately interconnected populations. This time, we land here in the summer of 1988, when a new generation is about to come of age but old crimes, family dramas and love stories still linger in memory. If “The Round House” is less sweeping and symphonic than “The Plague of Doves,” it is just as riveting. By boring deeply into one person’s darkest episode, Erdrich hits the bedrock truth about a whole community.

Some of the memorable characters last heard from in “The Plague of Doves” reappear. Listening to his grandfather, Mooshum, talking in his sleep, the boy learns the story of the round house that gives the novel both a crime scene and a metaphorical heart. Its shape is meant to commemorate the body of a buffalo that once provided shelter during a snowstorm for Nanapush, a young man caught in difficult circumstances (whom Erdrich readers may recognize as one of the narrators of her early novel “Tracks”). Built “to keep their people together and to ask for mercy from the Creator, since justice was so sketchily applied on earth,” the round house, like Native American culture itself, has proved tragically vulnerable.

Mooshum, randy as ever even though he’s now claiming to be 112 years old, provides not just priceless knowledge of the old ways but welcome comic relief in a novel about deeply serious matters. And he’s not alone. Grandmothers crack one another up as they embarrass teenagers with tales of an 87-year-old man who “can go five hours at a stretch.” These older Native Americans, as Erdrich writes of one

old lady, have “survived many deaths and other losses and had no sentiment left.”

Sexuality seethes underneath every plot twist, offering bliss and violence as equal possibilities. Much of the novel’s suspense comes as Joe and his friends make their own first forays into the mysteries of sex, eager to be initiated into its secrets, even as they search for a man who has committed a terrible sexual crime.

In trying to track down his mother’s attacker, Joe is seeking an answer to the question of what makes a person turn violent — and what a society should do with violent people. Mooshum’s story of the round house also involves Nanapush’s mother, who is suspected of being possessed by an evil spirit, or “wiindigoo,” which sometimes happens in “hungry times” and makes a person “become an animal, and see fellow humans as prey meat.” As tribal tradition has it, justice in this sort of case follows its own rules, but it never wavers on the necessity of killing a true wiindigoo.

Erdrich juxtaposes a tradition like this against the Roman Catholic conviction that every evil, “whether moral or material,” ultimately “results in good.” And she contrasts it with the legal system of the United States, which has failed Indians in the many oaths that have been broken and in the “toothless sovereignty” given to reservation authorities, as well as in what Judge Coutts labels their “jurisdiction issues.” These legal black holes have created an opening for predators to operate unchecked and unpunished, a situation that, we learn in an afterword, is only beginning to be remedied after the Tribal Law and Order Act was passed in 2010. Still: Be careful, liberal-minded reader! In Erdrich’s hands, you may find yourself, as I did, embracing the prospect of vigilante justice as regrettable but reasonable, a way to connect to timeless wisdom about human behavior. It wasn’t until I put the book down that I recognized — and marveled at — the clever way I had been manipulated.

THE ROUND HOUSE

By Louise Erdrich

321 pp. Harper/HarperCollins Publishers. \$27.99.

Maria Russo is a frequent contributor to the Book Review.

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