

The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse, by Louise Erdrich

reviewed by [Ann-Janine Morey](#) in the [September 26, 2001](#) issue

In the closing lines of Louise Erdrich's new novel, Father Damien Modeste, who has been the priest at the Objibwe reservation of Little No Horse for many years, is being buried in the nearby lake. "As the dark water claimed him, his features blurred. His body wavered for a time between the surface and the feminine depth below," Erdrich writes.

That water language concludes the internal metaphoric structure of this complicated narrative, which draws alternately upon water and music for expressing the mystery of boundary and transformation between multiple worlds: men and women, Native American and Christian, animal and human, comic and tragic, human and divine. Through a series of stories that move back and forth in time, the "shape-shifting" that typifies Native American storytelling is brought into conversation with the Christian idea of "conversion," and the history of cultural encounter is re-formed in a way that preserves an essential, shared loveliness in each tradition without falsifying the loss and pain that accompanies the encounter between the two.

This shape-shifting is embodied by Father Damien himself, for Damien is actually Agnes DeWitt. Readers know the priest's real identity from the very beginning, for it is the richness of its implications that is the mystery, not the deception itself.

The story begins in 1996, in the twilight of Father Damien's long, devoted service, when the Vatican has sent a representative to investigate the miraculous life of Sister Leopolda. However, as the Vatican representative discovers, Sister Leopolda's twisted sainthood is not nearly as interesting as the surprising sainthood of Father Damien.

Agnes DeWitt was literally swept away by flood waters to the remote Ojibwe reservation. There she donned the robes of Father Damien Modeste, drowned on his way to assume his assignment on the reservation, and thus begins his/her lifetime of secret service. A cross-cultural love story also begins, for Damien loves Nanapush,

the local trickster, and his extended family--Fleur Pillager, Margaret Kaskpaw, Lulu Nanapush and Mary Kashpaw. Later, Agnes also falls in love with Father Gregory Wekkle, who is sent to assist Damien at the reservation, and for the second time in her life she becomes a joyously realized, sexual woman. When Gregory leaves, Damien intends to end his life. But when he goes to say goodbye to his friend, Nanapush puts up a sweat lodge for him and brings him back from despair. Damien discovers that he "loved not only the people but also the very thingness of the world," and Agnes finds her salvation "composed of the very great and the very small. The vast comfort of a God who comforted her in a language other than her own."

In the inarticulate devotion of the abandoned, abused Mary Kashpaw, the face of Christ is revealed to Damien, who on his deathbed prepares himself for Ojibwe afterlife. Through such moments, Erdrich imagines the ways Christian and Native American spiritual systems sink into one another until one becomes the other, again and again.

This is the miracle of Erdrich's writing. She conveys the fluidity of meanings across religious systems and across time through her full, rich characters: from the furious piety of Leopolda and the patient service of the little community of nuns, to the astringent love of Margaret for her wily Nanapush and the extravagant love of Damien for his/her chosen people, which has been expressed by absolving all who asked for forgiveness.

Erdrich's characters move from novel to novel, and the landscape of her fictional Ojibwe and German communities in the Dakota novels is as engaging, detailed and powerful as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha county. Readers new to her books will also want to read *Love Medicine* (1984), for which she won the National Book Critics Circle Award; *The Beet Queen* (1986); and *Tracks* (1988) for the extraordinary pleasure of becoming further acquainted with these characters, and with one of our most gifted contemporary writers.