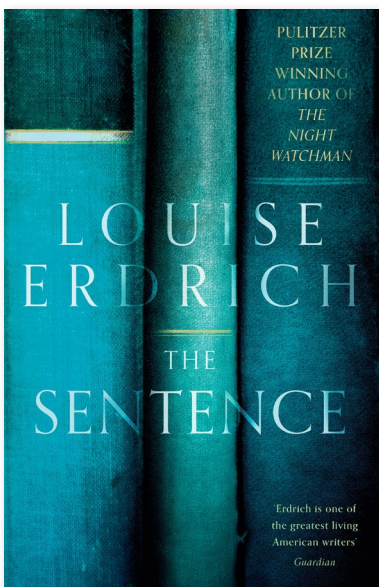


# Women's Prize for Fiction 2022



## 2022 SHORTLIST READING GUIDE

### THE SENTENCE BY LOUISE ERDRICH



#### PLOT SUMMARY

A small independent bookstore specialising in Indigenous books in Minneapolis is haunted from November 2019 to November 2020 by the store's most annoying customer. Flora – a white woman who, in life, was passionate about adopting Indigenous Dakota culture – dies on All Souls' Day, but she simply won't leave Birchbark Books.

Tookie, who has landed a job selling books after years of incarceration that she survived by reading 'with murderous attention' must solve the mystery of this haunting. At the same time, she is trying to understand all that occurs in Minneapolis during a year of grief, astonishment, isolation and furious reckoning – including the murder of George Floyd, the subsequent riots, the onset of Covid-19, and a new baby in her life.

A rich, emotional and profound story, *The Sentence* asks what we owe to the living, the dead, to the reader and to the book.

#### WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

*The Sentence* considers the idea of haunting and being haunted in a variety of ways. First, and most obvious, Flora haunts Birchbark Books in a very literal way, and her presence preoccupies Tookie the most of all the shop staff. Indeed, Flora's haunting of Birchbark Books seems to be her final stab at self-centred cultural appropriation: even in death, she doesn't understand that the Dakota culture is not hers just because she wants it.

Tookie herself is haunted by her past, and particularly her time in prison, and Hetta is haunted by her participation in a porn movie. Ironically, though Pollux is engaged with his own Indigenous tradition of spirit

shamanism, Tookie refuses to mention the haunting to him for some time, wrongly thinking that he doesn't believe in ghosts.

However, there is another theme of being haunted, as Asema points out:

*'Think how white people believe their houses . . . are haunted by Indians, when it's really the opposite. We're haunted by settlers and their descendants. We're haunted by the Army Medical Museum and countless natural history museums and small-town museums who still have unclaimed bones in their collections.'*

Asema is, of course, correct: modern American culture haunts the sacred ground of hundreds of different Indigenous cultures, having taken tribal lands by force in the past and being literally built upon them. In a way, Birchbark Books operates as a kind of safe space or oasis for Native American people in the book, which makes it even more terrible that it is, even temporarily, haunted by a white woman.

Last, of course, the repression of Indigenous culture, and the racism that people of colour in the US experience reverberates through Erdrich's book, echoing in the racist murder of George Floyd. Erdrich reminds us that America is haunted by its violent past, and that racism – rather than being a ghostly presence – is alive and well.

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Louise Erdrich, a member of the Turtle Mountain Band and of Chippewa, is the author of many novels as well as volumes of poetry, children's books and a memoir of early motherhood. Her novel *The Round House* won the National Book Award for Fiction. *Love Medicine* and *LaRose* received the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction. Erdrich lives in Minnesota with her daughters and is the owner of Birchbark Books, a small independent bookstore. Her most recent book, *The Night Watchman*, won the Pulitzer Prize. A ghost lives in her creaky old house.



A really unusual read!  
It's a ghost story but it's  
also about heritage. It's  
smart, funny and witty.'

Lorraine Candy, 2022 Judge

## DISCUSSION POINTS

Through the book, we are thinking about the different kinds of 'sentence' Erdrich refers to. First, we think of Tookie's prison sentence, and then perhaps about the sentence in language, which is something that Tookie often considers.

But what other sentences could this novel be about? When the first mention of Covid-19 comes into the book, we start to think about how the pandemic has created different types of sentences: perhaps the new language and phraseology we started to use, about testing, death rates, survival rates, R rates, underlying conditions and lateral flow tests.

Heartbreakingly, Covid has also, for many people, been a death sentence. Has Covid sentenced our society to a particular kind of fate? Why do some receive that sentence and not others? Do you think of Covid as a sentence of some kind, in the sense of a judgement or imposed penalty? How has it affected your life?

Lastly, consider why Native American people are the most over-sentenced people currently imprisoned in the US, as Tookie tells us at the beginning of the book. How do you feel about that? How are books, as collections of sentences, trying to make sense of the pandemic for all of us?

## QUESTIONS

Tookie believes at one point that a sentence in the handwritten memoir killed Flora. Can books kill, in a figurative sense? How? Conversely, how can they save lives?

Tookie tells us about 'cowbirds', the name for self-published books that authors sometimes leave in the shop. Have you read any self-published books (or written any?) and what did you think of them/how did you find the experience of writing them?

Consider Laurent and Pollux as fathers. How do they compare and contrast?

Did you relate to the character Dissatisfaction? Are you an insatiable reader like him? Do you have similarly rigid reading requirements, or do you like broader categories of books?

## NEXT STEPS

*The Sentence* is, among many things, a book about loving books, independent bookshops and the joy of finding the perfect book. Indeed, it features Erdrich's own real-life bookshop, Birchbark Books in Minnesota. Even more brilliantly, we are given Tookie's own personal book

recommendations at the end of *The Sentence*, which provide a reading list par excellence, including a raft of books by Indigenous authors. Thinking about recommendation, write a book review of *The Sentence* (or another favourite); this could be in a reading log, or a notecard to a friend as you share the book with them.

*The Sentence* features the Covid-19 pandemic, a moment in our collective history and consciousness that has affected all of us. Think about how you would represent the experience, or what someone you know would write in reflection if it has been a challenging or painful time for you personally.



If you enjoyed this book, you might like to read these:

**Louise Erdrich** won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2021 for *The Night Watchman*, her story set in the 1950s about a proposed threat by the US Government intended to take away Native American land and erase Native American identity.

*Crazy Brave* by **Joy Harjo**, the first Native American United States Poet Laureate, is a memoir of a difficult youth, young adulthood, and transformation into an award-winning poet and musician.



WHICH ONE WILL YOU READ NEXT?