

The Night Watchman
A novel by Louise Erdrich

Based on the extraordinary life of National Book Award-winning author Louise Erdrich's grandfather who worked as a night watchman and carried the fight against Native dispossession from rural North Dakota all the way to Washington, D.C., this powerful novel explores themes of love and death with lightness and gravity and unfolds with the elegant prose, sly humor, and depth of feeling of a master craftsman.

—Harper Collins Publishing

How to Use This Discussion Guide

All art, whether literary or visual, arises from the context of its time. Creating bridges between the literary and visual arts is what makes the **MFAH Book Club** unique.

This discussion guide features discussion questions, as well as select works from the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in order to help readers explore the central themes of Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman* through works of art.

How to Connect Virtually

The MFAH continues to serve art and literature lovers from afar during this time of social distancing. Read the book and discuss the questions, quotes, and associated art works below with your book club via virtual chat rooms like Zoom, FaceTime, or Skype. You can also use this guide for personal reflection. View art works up close on the MFAH collections webpage: mfah.org/art.

If you are not a member of a formal book club, consider joining the MFAH Digital Book Club on the **Goodreads** web platform: mfah.org/goodreads, where you can start discussions with other readers and receive MFAH Book Club updates.

Please email bookclub@mfah.org with any questions.

Select Works from the MFAH Collections

The following works of art, which come from diverse cultures and include a range of media, relate to *The Night Watchman's* literary themes. Consider these works as a starting point to deepen your discussion and to make your own connections.



Maria and Julian Martinez, Jar (Olla) with Feathers and Avanyu, 1930–43, earthenware with slip, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Miss Ima Hogg, 44.171.

[CLICK HERE](#)

Maria and Julian Martinez were artists from the San Ildefonso Pueblo in New Mexico. Inspired by ancient pottery, they re-created traditional motifs, such as the figure of the water serpent Avanyu featured on this jar. They are most well known for their technical innovations, particularly inventing the black-on-black style seen here. How does their work embody similar themes to those found in Louise Erdrich's novel, for example, the desire to preserve one's cultural practices in the face of upheaval and erasure?



Each Hopi kachina doll represents a specific kachina, an immortal being that connects the spirit and human world. While *The Night Watchman's* characters are members of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa tribe with their own distinct beliefs and traditions, how can you connect the kachina dolls to Erdrich's novel through shared themes such as ritual, belief in a spirit world, and the transfer of knowledge to the next generation?

Hopi culture, Owl Maiden (Mongwa Wuhti) Kachina Figure, 1915–25, wood, paint, and feathers, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Miss Ima Hogg, 44.408.

[CLICK HERE](#)



Jean-Siméon Chardin's humble kitchen scene shows a few everyday kitchen items, vegetables, and a leg of lamb suspended from a hook. How does this painting relate to descriptions of preparing, eating, and going without food in *The Night Watchman*? Are there connections between this image and the way you imagine Zhanaat's kitchen might look?

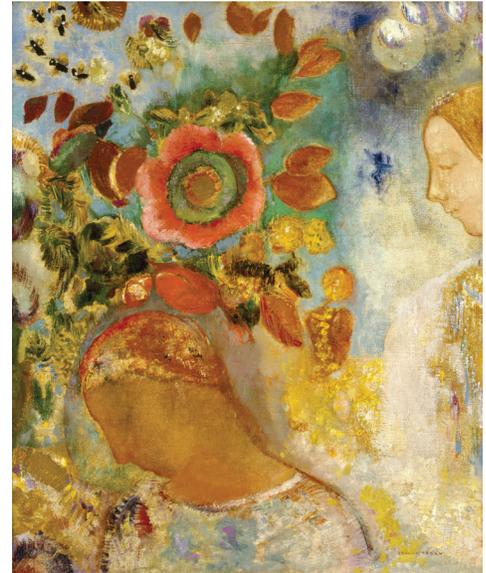
Jean-Siméon Chardin, Still Life with Leg of Lamb, 1730, oil on canvas, Sarah Cambell Blaffer Foundation, Houston, BF.1992.4.

[CLICK HERE](#)

Odilon Redon is known for his paintings that explore the inner psyche and include dream-like imagery. This work in particular seems consonant with how Erdrich often describes the forest with its vibrant leaves of yellow and gold. The figures also offer comparisons to the central characters of the novel, which wrestles with the heartache felt by losing a sister and the lengths one will go to be reunited, as well as the ability to communicate amongst mother, daughter, and sister through the world of dreams.

Odilon Redon, Two Young Girls Among Flowers, 1912, oil on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Audrey Beck Jones, 85.308.

[CLICK HERE](#)



Discussion Questions

Pose these questions to spark group conversation or for your own personal reflection.

1. Louise Erdrich says that she wrote *The Night Watchman* to keep alive the memory of the United States government's efforts to terminate Native American tribes. Did you know about termination before reading this novel? In what other ways does the author address themes of memory and remembrance through her narrative?
2. What roles do names and language play in *The Night Watchman*? How are names and language a source of conflict? How do they foster community and reconciliation?
3. The title of the novel *The Night Watchman* takes on new meaning in the chapter "The Night Watch" (p. 327). What other meanings might this title have?
4. How do dreams function in this novel? Where do dreams and waking life blur? Similarly, what role do ghosts play in the story?
5. There are detailed descriptions of food, and the lack thereof, throughout this book. Erdrich describes paltry meals eaten alone, as well as traditional dishes shared amongst a community. Why do you think meals and eating are given such a high level of attention?
6. This story includes various father figures, including the selfless Thomas Wazhashk and Wood Mountain, as well as the neglectful and abusive Pogo Paranteau. What message(s) did you take away about fatherhood, as well as family and community?
7. Did this novel cause you to reflect on or reconsider your own ideas about American history and the United States government's relationship with Native American tribes today?

Quotes for Reflection

Consider quotes from the novel. Use the quotes included below or bring in additional quotes that resonate with you to root your conversations about art and literature in the text itself.

“Eman-cipation. This word would not stop banging around in his head. Emancipated. But they were not enslaved. Freed from being Indian was the idea. Emancipated from their land. Freed from the treaties that Thomas’s father and grandfather had signed and that were promised to last forever. So as usual, by getting rid of us, the Indian problem would be solved.” [p. 82]

“She stared at herself. Was this really Patrice? Or was this itchy blue woman who’d just pretended to be a watery sexpot her other self. Pixie. Definitely Pixie. But she would leave that girl behind starting now.” [p. 176]

“After all, when Biboon had sent him to boarding school, he’d said, ‘Study hard because we need to know the enemy.’ Over the years, he’d realized the wisdom of that.” [p. 278]

“I feel like they’re with me, those way-back people. I never talk about it. But they’re all around us. I could never leave this place.” [p. 326]

Author Biography



Photo by Hilary Abe

Louise Erdrich is the author of fifteen novels as well as volumes of poetry, children’s books, short stories, and a memoir of early motherhood. Her novel *The Round House* won the National Book Award for Fiction. *The Plague of Doves* won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and her debut novel *Love Medicine* was the winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award. Erdrich has received the Library of Congress Prize in American Fiction, the prestigious PEN/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction, and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize. She lives in Minnesota with her daughters and is the owner of Birchbark Books, a small independent bookstore.

–Harper Collins Publishing

Bayou Bend/Rienzi History Book Club

Look to Bayou Bend and Rienzi for good books and great conversations inspired by history. Throughout the year, the two house museums host free discussions about books on life in America and Europe in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Meetings alternate between Bayou Bend and Rienzi. Selected History Book Club texts, as well as an array of decorative arts and historical resources, are available at the Kitty King Powell Library and Study Center at Bayou Bend’s Lora Jean Kilroy Visitor and Education Center. Some History Book Club selections are carried by The Shop at Bayou Bend, with discounts for MFAH members. For information as well as future and past History Book Club selections, visit mfah.org/historybookclub.

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