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Celebrated Author Louise Erdrich Speaks at Illinois Wesleyan

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – As celebrated author Louise Erdrich read from her story *The Red Convertible* Thursday night at Illinois Wesleyan University, her voice rose and dipped with the humor and emotion infused in the tale of a Native American mother and daughter, and carried the audience at Westbrook Auditorium along with each word.

“What if, just as sure as we are pulled toward Earth and destined to go down into it at last, we are also at the same rate pulled toward heaven. No wonder we are stretched top to bottom, pulled at both ends of our being. No wonder the soul cannot decide where to wedge itself,” read Erdrich, who called *The Red Convertible* a “love story about middle age and the difference between generations.”

Part of the eighth annual Ames/Milner Visiting Author Program – a joint venture between The Ames Library at Illinois Wesleyan University and Milner Library at Illinois State University – Erdrich’s Thursday evening reading was followed by a question and answer session, and an autograph session at The Ames Library.

Erdrich is famous for her series of books taking place in a fictional town close to a Native American reservation. Her work won the National Book Critics Circle Award for best work of fiction in 1984, as well as the *Los Angeles Times* award for best novel of 1984. Her most recent novel, *The Plague of Doves*, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in literature.

The daughter of a Chippewa, or Ojibwe mother and a German father, Erdrich talks openly about her draw to her heritage that plays a dominant role in her writing. “I have a great love and interest in both sides of my family,” she said, noting her grandfather, an Ojibwe tribal chair, was also a traditional Native American dancer. Though her family often visited the Turtle Mountain Ojibwe Reservation where her mother was born, she was raised in a small, North Dakota town, similar to the ones that appear in her books. “I grew up not really thinking about what was being shared with me. But, I have tried to become more aware. I study both the Chippewa and the German language.”

Erdrich stated her mother was the only one of her family to marry outside Native American tribes, yet she never felt excluded. “I did not think of myself as particularly different,” she said. “My parents were both Bureau of Indian Affairs school teachers, so I grew up around a mixed group of people.”

Along with reminiscing about life in a small town, and relaying the influence on growing up Catholic, Erdrich admitted she was glad for a new wave of women writers who share with her the common thread of motherhood. Her 1996 book, *A Blue Jay's Dance*, is a memoir of her early days as a mother. “When I think of some of my favorite female writers, such as Virginia Woolf, these were women who had no children,” said Erdrich. “Now we have writers like Mary Alice Monroe and Toni Morrison – really the first generation of women who write and have children, and understand that delicate balance.” She admits the combination can be a challenge. “Sometimes it just doesn’t work,” said Erdrich, who also owns a bookstore in Minneapolis with her family. (link to <http://birchbarkbooks.com/>). “There are days I need to sit down, close my eyes, and remind myself, ‘You are just one person.’”

Reviewers of Erdrich’s book compare her style to that of William Faulkner, whom she attributes as one of her influences, along with Flannery O’Conner, Carson McCullers and Joseph Conrad. It is a distinction noted by Illinois Wesleyan Department of English Chair James Plath, who introduced Erdrich on Thursday. “Falkner’s fiction is bigger than any label, and so is Louise Erdrich’s,” said Plath, who helped bring the writer to campus. “To enter her North Dakota is to experience her blended world in which the past mixes with the present, in which real narratives conjoin with Chippewa myths and legends, in which drama is balanced by comedies, and generations take turns telling their stories.”

Erdrich said she will continue to write stories based in the Native American culture because she feels they draw her closer to her family. “I remember hearing the names of my grandfather and grandmother. They are powerful to me, and I can remember sitting in their presence,” she said. “I do keep close track of my family, so I am connected to generations past.”