

There are ghosts aplenty populating Louise Erdrich's new novel, 'The Sentence'

A customer's ghost complicates the life of a Native bookseller in this timely novel by the Pulitzer Prize winner

By **Ellen Akins**
Star Tribune

I guess you could call Louise Erdrich's new novel, "The Sentence," a ghost story, though that implies a certain scary spookiness the book does not possess. But there are ghosts aplenty, and one in particular certainly spooks the novel's Ojibwe narrator, Tookie, whose nickname seems a quick take on her character, tough cookie.

At the outset, Tookie tells us about having been in prison for 10 years for what seems an almost slapstick crime, committed when "for many reasons, I didn't know who I was yet. Now that I have a better idea, I will tell you this: I am an ugly woman." Well, there's considerably more to her than that, and much of "The Sentence" is devoted to figuring out what that is.

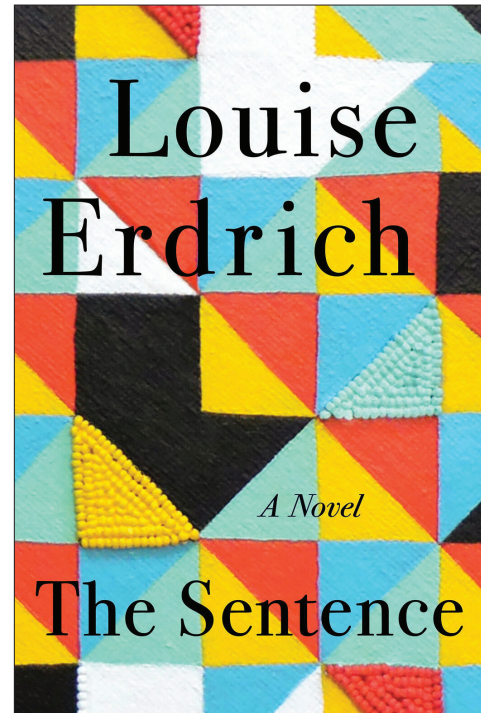
Conveniently, this endeavor is facilitated by Tookie's having spent her prison time reading voraciously, a learning

binge begun with books supplied by her "seventh-grade teacher in the reservation school," Jackie, who happens to work in a Minneapolis bookstore that specializes in Native literature, where Tookie gets a job.

This unnamed bookstore closely resembles a Minneapolis bookstore owned by Erdrich, not least because its owner, Louise, is a writer setting off on a book tour just as the pandemic is taking hold, at about the same time that Erdrich would've been promoting her last novel, "The Night Watchman," winner of the 2021 Pulitzer Prize.

The nature of the bookstore and its largely Native staff attract a certain sort of customer, the Indian-curious and wannabe; one of the most egregious of these, Tookie's "most annoying favorite customer," is Flora, who claimed to have an Indian great-grandmother and has recently died with, as her foster daughter explains, "this book splayed open beside her ... implying she'd not had time to use a bookmark."

This book, an antique bound journal



Harper

titled "The Sentence: An Indian Captivity 1862-1883," comes into Tookie's hands and proceeds to haunt her almost as vigorously as does Flora's persistent and aggressive ghost. Why this is, and what it has to do with Tookie's own troubled life history and identity, is what "The Sentence" is mostly about, though what constitutes an identity in general and in

particular is the larger question threaded through the novel. "I really believe that to live inauthentically is to live in a sort of hell," one of Tookie's co-workers says — but determining what's authentic can be somewhat hellish, too, it seems.

Clearly having been written in the midst of the events that overtake its characters — the coronavirus and then the Twin Cities' eruption over the murder of George Floyd — the book has a sometimes disconcerting you-are-there quality, which can seem out of step with the story proper, though the events do amplify the novel's themes of social and personal connection and dissociation, and of the historic crimes and contemporary aggressions, micro and overt, perpetrated in the name of white supremacy.

What does hold everything together here, fittingly enough in a novel so much of which takes place in a bookstore, is the connection made through reading. And one of the great charms of "The Sentence" for an avid reader is the running commentary on books — recommendations, judgments, citations, even, at the end, a "Totally Biased List" of Tookie's favorites. As she tells us: "The door is open. Go!"



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