



Debra Magpie Earling

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She left her grandmother standing beside the house and fought the urge to look back. Instead Louise looked far away to the watery light at the end of the long highway, the wavering pure light she could not reach, and wished this story was that of the tricking light, something appeared to be real but was only a dream.

— *Perma Red*

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Biography

Debra Magpie Earling was born in Spokane, Washington, on August 3, 1957. She grew up in Montana as a part of the Bitterroot Salish Tribe, also known as Flathead Indians, and she is a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Indian Reservation in Polson, Montana. Growing up, Earling heard stories about her Aunt Louise, the woman who would later become the focus of her novel *Perma Red*. Earling dropped out of school at fifteen. By the time she married at seventeen, she had received her GED from Spokane Community College. At eighteen, Earling became the first public defender in the Tribal Justice System on the Flathead Reservation in Montana. After two years of working in the Tribal Justice System, she left the state to go to college.

Quick Facts

- * Born in 1957
- * Native American author and scholar of English/Native American Studies
- * Author of *Perma Red* (2002)

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Biography continued

Earling attended the University of Washington in Seattle, where she became interested in writing. She achieved her Bachelor of Arts in English, which she completed in 1986 with Phi Beta Kappa honors, graduating magna cum laude. As a Ford Doctoral Fellow, she studied at Cornell University in New York from 1988-91, where she graduated with a Masters in English. She went on to earn her Master of Fine Arts in Fiction in 1992 at Cornell. From 1991 to 1998, Earling held positions in both Native American Studies and Creative Writing at the University of Montana in Missoula. Currently, she is an associate professor in the English Department there and teaches fiction and Native American Studies full-time.

Earling's work has appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Northeast Indian Quarterly*, and many anthologies including *Song of the Turtle*; *Contemporary Short Stories Celebrating Women*; *Circle of Women*; and *Talking Leaves: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Short Stories*. Her story most frequently included in anthologies is "The Old Wedding," an excerpt from *Perma Red*. In its review of her novel, *The Denver Post* said of Earling, "Like Louise Erdrich, Earling has a mythic quality in her writing that beautifully suits her tale. Earling draws on her intimate knowledge of the vast and unforgiving country and its people to weave this dark and moving tale" (quoted in *Perma Red*).

Although Earling has published many short stories, *Perma Red* is her first novel and has been receiving critical acclaim and awards ever since its release in 2002. It received the Western Writers Association Spur Award for Best Novel of the West in 2003, the Mountain and Plains Bookseller Association Award, WWA's Medicine Pipe Bearer Award for Best First Novel, a WILLA Literary Award, and the American Book Award. It is a Montana Book Award Honor Book and was chosen by Barnes and Noble as part of its "Discover Great New Writers" series.



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Earling's work continues a literary tradition started by Native American writers such as Leslie Silko and Sherman Alexie. As a number of earlier books -- such as Alexie's *Indian Killer*, Irvin Morris's *From the Glittering World*, Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*, or Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus* -- have done, Earling's fiction blends a subtle magic into everyday life. To the main character in *Perma Red*, it is perfectly conceivable that another character may have used love magic on her or set a snake on her sister. Charlie Kicking Woman, seeing that Louise's sister has been bitten, thinks, "I hadn't seen a bite before but I had heard the stories. With some the cool venom soaks the brain, with others the venom rides the nervous system like lit gasoline, short-circuiting, functions failing. I had never heard of an Indian dying from a bite, and I didn't want to be the first to witness it" (Earling 25). *Perma Red's* unique imagery ranges from earthy to fantastic while Earling's characters are unflinchingly realistic.

The story focuses on Louise White Elk, born and raised on the Flathead Indian Reservation, and the people who are constant in her life: her grandmother and her sister; Baptiste Yellow Knife, her eventual husband, who is obsessed with her from a young age and who simultaneously attracts and repels her; and Charlie Kicking Woman, whose life is inextricably linked with Louise's not only because of his role as a reservation police officer but because of his own fascination with her. Louise struggles to discover some way to stay where she wants to be, on the reservation, which means dodging not only Charlie but also the BIA social worker and what they both think is best for her. She also tries to come to terms with Baptiste and what the two of them mean to each other in a dynamic that is filled at once with animosity and irresistible fascination. The title for the book comes from Louise's nickname, "Perma Red," which she is called -- although never to her face -- because she is wild and will not settle down.

The book is set during the 1940s, but the sense of time in the novel has a slippery quality: it is difficult to determine for certain when any event happens. Past and present -- memory and perception -- blend together and overlap organically, bringing uncertainty to the book's chronology. The indefinite time adds a dream-like quality to the story, which is told from alternating perspectives. Louise's perspective is written in the third person, Charlie's perspective is written in first person, and the two never quite agree on their opinions of other characters or each other. Charlie emphasizes Louise's faults, especially her chronic truancy and drinking. He does not want to see her end up married to someone like Baptiste, trapped in reservation poverty and having kids. Louise is far more concerned about staying with the people she cares about and with her failure to extricate Baptiste from her life than with her own character faults.



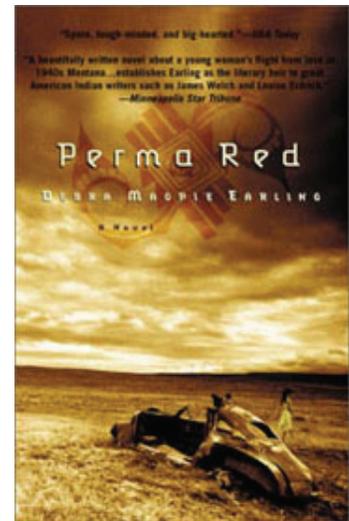
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Louise's grandmother is convinced that Baptiste used love medicine on Louise to hold her attention, and this use of the mystical world present in daily life is characteristic of the novel. Baptiste's mother is believed to be able to talk to rattle snakes, and she sets a rattler on Louise's sister. Louise thinks initially that Baptiste has the power to track her and is disappointed to learn it is only his mundane obsession with a woman.

Two decades' worth of hard work is evident in the crafting of the novel. As reviewer David Abrams says: "[*Perma Red*] has been through at least nine different rewrites, trimmed from an epic-length 800 pages to a compact 288, burned to a crisp in a house fire, and rejected by publishers who loved the writing but thought the original ending too dark and brutal." Losing the first draft to a fire changed the structure of the book: Earling began to write using multiple voices and to eliminate some of the perspectives she had originally used ("Writing the Great" Abrams). As she cut the story from its original length, Earling tried to move away from writing in a more scene-by-scene style, as she had originally done, to offering more exposition. The final draft also dealt frankly with violence and brutality. As Earling says in an interview with David Abrams, "I tried to show what I was seeing. I think the scene where the white men are beating Baptiste -- that was a hard scene to sit through and write and see" ("Writing the Great" Abrams).

Despite, or perhaps because of, its violence, the book has been received very well overall. Abrams compares her to well-known Native American writers such as Louise Erdrich, James Welch, and Sherman Alexie. Another reviewer, James Crumley, commented, "I haven't read a novel that affected me this much since I first encountered Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*" (powells.com). Sherman Alexie said of *Perma Red*: "Like the Loch Ness monster, Sasquatch, and Amelia Earhardt, this book has been circling around my life. I caught glimpses of it, heard people talk about it, saw murky photos of Debra Earling reading from it. And now here it is: the missing link, the Rosetta Stone, the cure for every damn disease there is. This book was great in all its pieces. In totality, it's epic" (Powells.com).





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Earling's works are having an important impact on Native literature. *Perma Red* reminds us that not all stories need to have a happy Hollywood ending. Sometimes life is complicated, brutal, and beautiful. It is acceptable, as in Alexie's *Indian Killer*, to rail against white stupidity and ignorance, but that is tempered in *Perma Red* by the pragmatic view of Charlie Kicking Horse, the BIA social worker, and other characters that assimilation at some level may be necessary in order to prosper. Earling raises the standard of both character and plot development by giving voice to different opinions and values, even if, occasionally, some may speak louder than others.

Currently, Debra Magpie Earling is one of fifteen American writers and thirty-five American photographers who are part of the National Millennium Survey Project. The Project will tour seven U.S. cities, Europe, and Asia from 2002-2005, featuring art and literature in an international museum project intended to showcase different perspectives on American life and culture from 1995 to 2000. Earling is also an avid speaker for Native American writers, and she is often a guest at college writing symposiums around the country.

Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

Short Story in *The Last Best Place: A Montana Anthology* (2003)

Perma Red (2002)

Novel excerpt in *Reinventing the Enemy's Language* (1997)

Novel excerpt in *Talking Leaves: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Short Stories* (1991)

Stories in:

- *Circle of Women: Anthology of Western Women Writers*
- *Wild Women: Anthology of Women Writers*
- *Ploughshares*
- *Northeast Indian Quarterly*
- *Northern Lights*



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Works about the author

- Abrams, David. "Stepping Forward" (*January Magazine*).
- Abrams, David. "Writing the Great (Native) American Novel: An Interview with Debra Magpie Earling" (*Drexel Online Journal*, 2004).
- Anhalt, Diana. "Held Hostage by the Past" (*The Texas Observer*, 2002).
- Lanford, Gwen. "Never Truly Passing" (*Indian Country Today*, 2002).
- Powell's Books. "Debra Magpie Earling" (2004).
- McDonough, Victoria Tilney. "Mourning's End" (*Missoula Independent*, 2004).
- Rakoff, Joanna Smith. "Debra Magpie Earling Avenges the Dead" (*Poets and Writers Magazine*, 2002).