I don’t understand why suddenly I begin to think in a certain voice and the writing comes out in a certain voice . . . I must have somehow appropriated dozens of confessions of people I’ve never met or known.

— Louise Erdrich

In her remarkable novel *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001) Louise Erdrich takes her readers through the spiritual realm and on a wondrous journey of soul-searching. The novel challenges and bends our ideas about subjects as deep as the meaning of gender and the reason for religion. Erdrich paints one picture, and then turns it upside down and makes the reader look at it another way.

*The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* spans more than 80 years, though not in chronological order. It is a continuation of Erdrich’s earlier novels *Love Medicine*, *Tracks*, *The Beet Queen*, *The Bingo Palace*, and *Tales of Burning Love* -- again taking place at the fictional Ojibwe reservation “Little No Horse.” This novel reaches far back into the saga’s roots as well as up to the present. Father Damian Modeste is the main character in *The Last Report*. His presence is the one constant in this intricately woven patchwork of stories, many of which could stand on their own as short stories. The novel begins in the present with Father Damian writing to the Pope about his strange experiences and revelations at Little No Horse. Father Damian has been writing to “His Holiness” for over 70 years about his tribulations as priest on the reservation and requesting spiritual guidance. These letters are some of the book’s tenderest moments as we feel the controlled desperation in the Father’s appeal for a response from the Vatican.

Someone is finally sent from the Vatican to interview Father Damian, but not for the purpose requested. The Vatican is considering the deceased Sister Leopolda for sainthood because of the inexplicable “miracles” associated with her. (Many readers will remember Sister Leopolda’s cruel abuse of the young Marie Lazarre in *Love Medicine*.) Father Damian knows sinister secrets about Sister Leopolda, but Leopolda also knows Father Damian's one big secret -- that he is a woman. Sister Leopolda holds this over Father Damian to keep him silent.
The story jumps back to 1910 when Sister Cecilia (Father Damian) is struggling with a rival for her devotion to the church: her passion for piano playing. The young Sister Cecilia is driven to distraction by the ecstasy that possesses her when she plays Chopin. She is moved to spiritual rapture that is, paradoxically, sexual rapture as well. Such intensity is too much for the quiet convent, and Sister Cecilia leaves, resuming her birth name, Agnes DeWitt. Agnes wanders onto the farm of a loner named Berndt Vogel. Berndt is immediately entranced by the strangely quiet woman. Sharing few words but great love, the two live contentedly on the humble farm. Agnes even manages to restore a piano into her life by removing a farmhouse wall for the piano’s delivery. One calm summer day this peaceful world is shattered when a band of traveling robbers injures Agnes and kills Berndt. Shortly after, a horrendous flood sweeps the whole farm away, including Agnes as she clings to the top of her beloved piano. Eventually she washes ashore where she discovers the drowned body of the actual Father Damian Modeste. Agnes makes a radical and instinctive decision to assume the identity of Father Damian and continues to the reservation where the residents are awaiting the Father’s arrival.

Poverty, sickness, and exploitation of the land by outsiders are some of the stark forces the new Father Damian encounters after taking up his position on this Ojibwe reservation. But Father Damian is a tireless, faithful, servant of his Catholic religion and the native people. Thinking his main purpose is to “convert” the native people to Christianity, it turns out to be more of an education for Father Damian. He befriends the wise, charming, and funny Nanapush who has a rich mastery of language as well as a magnificent vision of the Ojibwe spirit world. Over the years, Father Damian rethinks his beliefs. For example, nothing haunts Father Damian as much as having his female identity revealed. He is startled when Nanapush casually asks him one day why he has been pretending to be a man all of these years. Father Damian is stunned and realizes the wisdom of the Ojibwe people who are not as extreme in their view of life, gender, good, or evil, as is the Catholic Church. Father Damian finds a balance, taking from each religion the best they have to offer.
The novel also questions what should be valued and considered heroic. The reason the representative from the Vatican even happens to meet Father Damian is because Sister Leopolda is being considered for possible sainthood status. Leopolda has been vaguely associated with a few strange events that were reported to be miracles. But during the Vatican’s investigation, the quiet strength and selflessness of Father Damian is noticed. His depth of compassion and forgiveness for the people who he helped, and who changed him, is a true “miracle.” This story is involved and wrenching, yet tender and funny. As Louise Erdrich describes in the introductory quote, she does seem to inhabit Father Damian at times. Erdrich’s description of the Father wrestling with his own death is unworldly -- and hard to imagine it came from the pen of someone who was not really inside the Father’s body when he passed on.

Louise Erdrich grew up in North Dakota and is a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe. She lives in Minnesota with her family and operates a small bookstore in Linden Hills called Birch-bark Books.

Reviewed by Kathryn Quam