



The Painted Drum

By Louise Erdrich
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Introduction

When Faye Travers is called upon to appraise the estate of a family in her small New Hampshire town, she isn't surprised to discover a forgotten cache of valuable Native American artifacts. But she is stunned when she finds a rare drum—a powerful yet delicate object, ornamented with symbols she doesn't recognize, dressed in red tassels and a beaded belt and skirt—especially since, without touching the instrument, she hears it sound.

From Faye's discovery, we trace the drum's passage from the reservation on the northern plains to New Hampshire and back. Through the voice of Bernard Shaawano, an Ojibwe, we learn how his grandfather fashioned the drum after years of mourning his young daughter's death, and how it changes the lives of those whose paths it crosses.

Through these compelling voices, *The Painted Drum* explores the strange power that lost children exert on the memories of those they leave behind, and as the novel unfolds, its elegantly crafted narrative comes to embody the intricate, transformative rhythms of human grief.

Questions for Discussion

1. How would you characterize the relationship between Faye Travers and Kurt Krahe, and how does it change over the course of the novel?
2. How does *The Painted Drum* affect Faye Travers, Bernard Shaawano, Simon Jack, and Shawnee individually, and to what extent can the drum's mystical qualities be explained by its unusual origins?
3. How significant is the wolf attack on Anaquot's older daughter in the larger context of *The Painted Drum*, and why might the author have chosen to relate this event in the "story within a story" format?
4. To what extent do you agree with Faye and Elsie Travers that the theft of the drum from the Jewett Parker Tatro estate and the return of it to the Ojibwe people was an ethical decision?
5. How does the author use the theme of grief relating to the deaths of young children to connect different characters in *The Painted Drum*?
6. To what extent do the creatures that populate *The Painted Drum*—wolves, ravens, coyotes, a chained dog, an errant bear—seem to represent or symbolize something other than their animal selves?
7. Why do Anaquot and Ziigwan'aage agree to befriend one another and conspire against Simon Jack?
8. Of all of the characters in *The Painted Drum*, which did you find most memorable, and why?
9. How does the accidental fire at Ira's house awaken the drum, and what accounts for Shawnee's ability to hear it?
10. To what extent does Faye's discovery of missing dog's skeleton in the final scene of the book bring the narrative of the novel full-circle?

About the Author

Louise Erdrich is the author of eleven novels as well as volumes of poetry, children's books, and a memoir of early motherhood. Her novel *Love Medicine* won the National Book Critics Circle Award. *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* was a finalist for the National Book Award. She lives in Minnesota with her daughters and is the owner of Birchbark Books, a small independent bookstore.