

M Reviews



Perma Red
by Debra Magpie Earling
BlueHen (Penguin Putnam),
2002, 296 pp., \$24.95

On the surface *Perma Red* tells the shimmering story of a beautiful sixteen-year-old girl on Montana's Flathead Indian Reservation in the 1940s. But hidden below is another world entirely, where everything you experience is different.

In the surface story, the lovely but self-destructive Louise White Elk is buffeted by circumstances that took her mother prematurely, forced her to live in soul-searing poverty and surrounded her with men rendered foolish by her dazzle. Bouncing from school to school, Louise grabs onto marriage as the only thing that will save her. But her marriage, even though it's to a boy who has loved her since childhood, is founded on lust and false motives and so is doomed; it lasts all of four days.

Only when nature snatches one of the few people Louise truly loves does she begin a brutal journey into maturity. The process takes place during the savage Montana winter, which burrows into the hearts and minds of the reservation's residents until whatever human kindness they have is devoured by cold and hunger. People careen between rage and

resignation and are driven to betray their truest selves. When Louise denies knowing her husband, Baptiste Yellow Knife, for the sake of a meal and a warm ride home, she can sink no lower, and the story takes a turn toward spring and redemption.

It would have been easy for Earling to have limited her book to this less ambitious story, with its fiery heroine. But the novel Earling has given us takes the reader through the looking glass into a world where life and landscape intertwine in an ontology based on sensate experience. In the land of the Flathead, every vista communicates a single message: at best, life's purchase on the planet is tenuous. As quickly as a headlight-stunned deer can crash through a windshield, the Montana landscape can snuff out life. The dead deer, a family of five frozen in the river: nature claims each with equal indifference. Being alert and reading the signs are matters of life and death.

To read this book is to discover that the wind has color; the sky, texture; and fear, flavor. Even Earling's syntax testifies to the predominance of phenomenology. Her short, simple, subject-verb-object pattern expresses that it's the thing itself—whether a ripple on a river or a leer at a bar—that must be apprehended if you are to survive.