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Debra Magpie Earling. *Perma Red.* New York: BlueHen Books, 2002. 320 pp.

Marta Lysik

In *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual* David Treuer of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe criticizes established American Indian writers' "inauthenticity." Militant criticism of this sort does not prevent newcomers, Debra Magpie Earling for example, from emerging and winning readership. A member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, who has worked as a Tribal Public Defender in the Tribal Justice System on the Flathead Reservation in Montana, and who currently teaches fiction and Native American Studies at the University of Montana, Earling published her debut novel in 2002. Among many authors, Louise Erdrich has also expressed her appreciation: "It is my pleasure to welcome Debra Magpie Earling's boldly drawn and passionate novel, *Perma Red."*

The novel sheds light on the harsh realities of the Flathead Indian Reservation in the 1940s. The protagonist Louise White Elk, based on Earling's aunt Louise, is entangled in contradictory longings being drawn towards three men: Baptiste Yellow Knife, the reservation police officer Charlie Kicking Horse, and a rich white man Harvey Stoner who buys and sells allotments belonging to Native Americans. A half-breed orphan who rarely belongs, Louise is wild and rebellious, running away from schools and competing with boys. From an ugly duckling, she transforms into a strange beauty chased by men, among them Baptiste Yellow Knife, the son of the rattlesnake woman Dirty Swallow. He can communicate with spirits and foretell events. At the same time he is prone to drinking bouts, unfaithfulness and abuse. Louise decides to marry him, yet after four days, she flees again and has an affair with Stoner, who pampers her with things she has never had. On many occassions both, Baptiste and Stoner batter her nearly to death, but she is saved by Charlie, who continuously attempts to rescue her from herself, the others, the place and the fate that claim her.

Published eighteen years after *Love Medicine*, and fourteen years after *Tracks*, *Perma Red* tackles many similar subjects. The protagonist is reminiscent of Fleur Pillager, sometimes of June Kashpaw, insofar as she is a survivor attracting death and calamities, and even though violated by men, she refuses to be victimized. The novels have more than one narrator telling the story of life inside and outside the reservation, where tradition and modernity clash, mystical and magical qualities blend with everyday struggles, and the sacred accompanies the quotidian. Initially conceived as an 800-page epic, *Perma Red* was rewritten several times, but the ambition to have an appeal of the great (Native) American novel has remained. Set in a very specific context of reservation reality infested with violence, poverty, alcohol

abuse, mysterious deaths left unpunished, and racial tensions, the novel has a very universal resonance, as it narrates a life against all odds and individual's pursuit of happiness. According to Treuer, American Indian fiction needs to be judged as literature, not ethnography. Even when employing specific characters in a particular context, Debra Magpie Earling manages to avoid the pitfall, as she spins a universal tale about human nature and culture.