

Approved for use in English III & IV

Summary of the Work:

“One Sunday in the spring of 1988, a woman living on a reservation in North Dakota is attacked. The details of the crime are slow to surface because Geraldine Coutts is traumatized and reluctant to relive or reveal what happened, either to the police or to her husband, Basil, and thirteen-year-old son, Joe. In one day, Joe's life is irrevocably transformed. He tries to heal his mother, but she will not leave her bed and slips into an abyss of solitude. Increasingly alone, Joe finds himself thrust prematurely into an adult world for which he is ill prepared.

While his father, a tribal judge, endeavors to wrest justice from a situation that defies his efforts, Joe becomes frustrated with the official investigation and sets out with his trusted friends, Cappy, Zack, and Angus, to get some answers of his own. Their quest takes them first to the Round House, a sacred space and place of worship for the Ojibwe. And this is only the beginning.” (Amazon summary)

“It is an exquisitely told story of a boy on the cusp of manhood who seeks justice and understanding in the wake of a terrible crime that upends and forever transforms his family. ... Erdrich's *The Round House* is a page-turning masterpiece of literary fiction—at once a powerful coming-of-age story, a mystery, and a tender, moving novel of family, history, and culture” (Good Reads summary).

Rationale:

The Round House is a gripping story that will captivate student readers from the beginning. The contemporary nature of the story, as well as the young protagonist, make it a relatable, high engagement text.

The novel fits well in a class like AP Lang that focuses on non-fiction texts and argumentation because it has obvious connections to current issues such as the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women crisis, tribal sovereignty, and other questions about how a society enforces justice.

It also works well for a class, like American Literature or AP Literature, that focuses on literary techniques. The novel doesn't have as many narrative shifts as most of Erdrich's books, making it more accessible to first-time readers of her writing. Still, there are enough narrative shifts to discuss the significance of point of view, as well as frame stories, and the effect of a retrospective first person narrator whose coming-of-age story offers good opportunity for analysis of age, maturity, and hindsight as they relate to perspective. The novel is also notable for its symbolic use of Native American stories, its humor, its compassionate characterization of multiple characters, and its suspenseful mystery/crime novel structure.

Professional Reviews and/or Critical Essays:

See the Titlewave website:
<http://www.titlewave.com>

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“In more than a dozen books of fiction — mostly novel length — that make up a large part of her already large body of work, Erdrich has given us a multitude of narrative voices and stories. Never before has she given us a novel with a single narrative voice so smart, rich and full of surprises as she has in *The Round House*. It's her latest novel, and, I would argue, her best so far.” [Book Review: 'The Round House,' By Louise Erdrich : NPR](#)

“Law is meant to put out society's brush fires, but in Native American history, it has often acted more like the wind. Louise Erdrich turns this dire reality into a powerful human story in your new novel, in which a Native American woman is raped somewhere in the vicinity of a sacred round house, and seeking justice becomes almost as devastating as the crime. ... In Erdrich's hands, you may find yourself as I did, embracing the prospect of vigilante justice as regrettable but reasonable, a way to connect to timeless wisdom about human behavior. It wasn't until I put the book down that I recognized—and marveled at—the clever way I had been manipulated. ['The Round House,' by Louise Erdrich - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#)

Noted Distinction:

- Winner of the National Book Award for Fiction
- *Washington Post* Best Book of the Year
- New York Times Notable Book
- Author won the Pulitzer Prize in 2020

Readability

- Lexile Score: 790L

Learning Resources Guidelines

- The novel meets the Learning Resources Guidelines.

“*The Round House* essentially makes a witness of the reader, inviting a consideration of the legal complications, social history, and far-reaching effects of violence that have made justice on the reservation a rare and dearly purchased commodity. ... While Erdrich does depict survival and love in the midst of violence and displacement, the circumstances are not inevitable. She challenges the reader to rise as a witness for tribal justice. Rooted in legal and cultural realities, Erdrich’s narrative voice and style shift to proclaim the urgency of her crusade.” Tharp, Julie. "Erdrich’s Crusade: Sexual Violence in *The Round House*." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Jennifer Stock, vol. 437, Gale, 2019. *Gale Literature Resource Center*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/H1100125591/LitRC?u=mtlib_2_1037&sid=bookmark-LitRC&xid=b6a50f10. Accessed 4 Oct. 2021. Originally published in *Studies in American Indian Literature*, vol. 26, no. 3, Fall 2014, pp. 25-40.

Notes on the Text:

(The best way to evaluate and understand a novel is to personally read the book in its entirety.)
The Round House is appropriate for upper level high school readers. While its language is accessible, there are mature themes including domestic and sexual violence. It also asks students to wrestle with complex issues such as legal jurisdiction, sovereignty, adoption, and cultural and religious identity.

Connection to the Curriculum:

The Round House addresses the MT constitutional mandate that “all educators must provide instruction including the distinct and unique heritage and contemporary contributions of American Indians in a culturally responsive manner.” It fulfills the MT State Standard RL.11-12.1 requiring that ELA teachers teach students “Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text, including those by and about American Indians, and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account”; and RL.11.12.7 “Analyze multiple interpretations of story, drama or poem, or traditional American Indian oral histories, evaluating how each version interprets the source text.”

Additional Connections:

(AP, Honors, Essential/Applied, Dramas, Films, etc.)

The nature of the legal issue at the center of this novel lends itself to evaluation of documents such as The Major Crimes Act of 1885, Public Law 280 (1953), The Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968, the Supreme Court Case *Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe*, The Indian Child Welfare Act and the Violence Against Women Act. This fits with Montana State Standard RI.11-12.8 “Delineate and evaluate the reasoning in seminal U.S. texts including those that dealt with American Indians, including the application of constitutional principles and use of legal reasoning and the premises, purposes, and arguments in works of public advocacy” and RI.11.12.9 “Analyze seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century foundational U.S. documents of historical and literary significance, (including The Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, American Indian treaties, and Iroquois Confederacy) for their themes, purposes and rhetorical features.