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## Book Review: Motherhood in Dystopia

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## BOOK REVIEW

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### Motherhood in Dystopia

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Louise Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God: A Novel* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017).

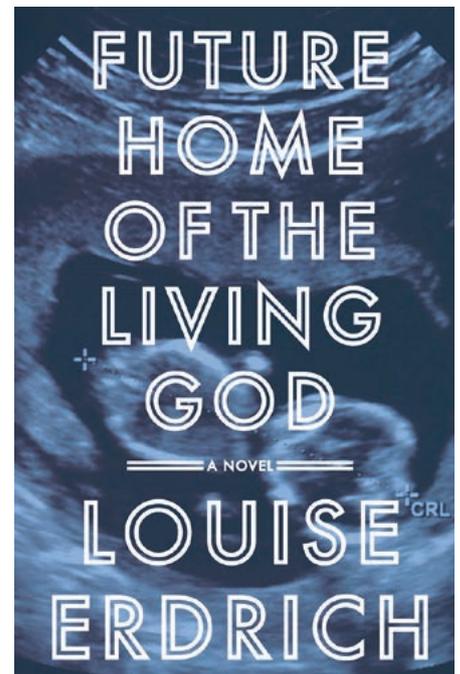
In each of my three pregnancies, there were many moments of stress and confusion, but perhaps the most stressful and confusing regularly occurred in my midwife's office during an ultrasound. "Look!" the technician would whisper, "can you see the little head? The legs! Oh, I think she's sucking her thumb!" and I would make noises of what I hoped sounded like joy and excitement, when in fact I had no idea what I was looking at. Ever. Head? Isn't that a behind? Legs? Where? Is that actually a baby? Isn't that a second head? Misty blurs within lighter blurs, squiggles of movement, shadows ... but a baby? My discomfort at these moments was only a distillation of the disorientation I felt for most of my pregnancies. The person I was disappeared beneath the physical and emotional weight of growing another human being.

Where once I was a private person, going about my business, my big belly now announced my inner state to the world. Joy? Certainly. I wanted those babies, and I had a partner and family and extended social networks ready to receive and love them. But I never really got the hang of pregnancy, despite having spent more than over two years, all told, in that state. I never got used to the peculiar sensation of having another creature inside me, moving about, clearly demanding and feeling and shifting in ways well beyond my control, from the first moment I felt it.

Louise Erdrich's newest novel, *Future Home of the Living God*, is an extended meditation on, among other things, pregnancy and its manifold meanings and implications, both for our society as a whole and for individual women. Set at some point in the not-too-distant future, the novel's characters are living in a moment when, in the words of the narrator and main character Cedar Hawk Songmaker, "our world is running backward. Or forward. Or maybe sideways, in a way as yet ungrasped." Evolution seems to be working in reverse. An ersatz saber-tooth tiger appears in Cedar's back yard and effortlessly dispatches a large Labrador

Retriever, dragging its carcass into an oak tree for a late-afternoon snack. Vegetables, flowers, and birds all begin reverse-engineering themselves into earlier, unfamiliar forms.

And babies. Something – the story, wisely, never tells us precisely what – is happening to human babies. Birth becomes more dangerous for both mother and child, possibly because the mothers' immune systems begin turning against their babies and against the mothers during birth. Following the dystopian story arc of Margaret Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale* (1985), as civil society dissolves, radical religious groups organize and take over the government (or what is left of it). They order women to serve as "Womb Volunteers" and force them, as part of their patriotic duty, to carry to term embryos they are impregnated by sperm and eggs taken from abandoned fertility centers. Those pregnant with "damaged" babies are drugged and imprisoned in former



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hospitals, overseen by this generation's Nurse Ratcheds. After the babies are born – by caesarean section, as soon as the fetuses are viable – their and their mothers' fates are unclear, though Cedar senses, rightly, that they are not propitious. There is a loosely organized resistance, but it is spotty and ineffectual. Cedar, the adopted Ojibwe child of white, liberal, Minnesotan parents, is pregnant with her boyfriend Phil's child, and through letters to that unborn child Cedar describes her experience of the disintegration of society and every familiar trace of American life.

other Erdrich novels: early in the story, Cedar goes on a search for her birth mother, the prosaically named Mary Potts, and finds an extended and loving Ojibwe family on the reservation. She seeks understanding of her Native American heritage, and is mildly disappointed to discover that her biological family is less exotic than her adoptive Songmaker parents. Cedar struggles with these discoveries, but this plot strand mostly takes a back seat to Cedar's efforts to elude capture by the newly established "authorities" and carry her child to term.

understand Cedar less as an individual than as the personification of all women whose bodies and choices are wrested from them by a hostile, external force. This lack of vividness does make *Future Home* a less-compelling read than many of Erdrich's other books. I cared less about Cedar than I did about Eva or Delphine (*The Master Butchers Singing Club*) or Evelina Harp (*The Plague of Doves* [2008]), and I missed the narrative richness that results from the mix of voices and perspectives she so often employs. But our current moment is especially ripe for dystopian fiction, and the moral subtlety and shading of Erdrich's other novels is absent here. Bad people are after Cedar. That the novel never indulges their perspective suggests that it is corrupt beyond consideration.

Erdrich is always an extraordinary writer, even when experimenting in a new genre. While elements of *Future Home of the Living God* may disappoint those who know and admire her other work, it is still compelling fiction. It asks questions that must be asked, and offers no easy answers, only a bleak and terrifying prospect. Glorified, fetishized, and demonized even during "normal" times, motherhood and pregnancy become, in Erdrich's hands, the locus of all that has gone wrong and can go wrong in the twenty-first century.

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For those at all familiar with Erdrich's work, most of this will sound mighty peculiar. A prolific novelist (*Future Home* is her fifteenth in that genre), poet, and children's book author, this is Erdrich's first foray into science fiction. Except for *The Master Butchers Singing Club* (2003), Erdrich's novels primarily, but not exclusively, concern Ojibwe and other Native American tribes and characters. (Erdrich herself is of German, French, and Ojibwe descent). They are most often told from the perspectives of multiple narrators. *Future Home* has occasional, familiar echoes of themes and ideas found in

Cedar's paranoia and discomfort, intensified by the presence of persecutors waiting quite literally outside her door, mirrors what many women experience during pregnancy – the sense that one's body is no longer one's own, but has become a public spectacle over which the mother no longer has (if, in fact, she ever had) power. And perhaps this is Erdrich's aim: to suggest that this imagined, uncomfortably near future, which seems so hideous and unthinkable, is merely our current reality in a hyper-intensified state. As a character, Cedar is less fully fleshed-out than any of the other women from Erdrich's fictional world. We might, then,



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