

A CONVERSATION WITH HEID ERDRICH

What inspired you to write your award-winning book?

The first section of *National Monuments*, titled "Ghost Nations," responded to monuments of American literature that reference or fail to reference Native people. Soon I turned toward writing about the body as monument and current science regarding human origins.

What interesting challenges did you encounter in writing *National Monuments*?

This book came easily in that one idea flowed toward the next until I felt a groove, but I did have some challenges balancing all the persona poems - where I take on a voice not my own. One editor saw a need for more personal poems. In the end I included three or four poems that were more the author's voice.

What do you like most about the book?

Well, I love having had the chance to work through a big question for me, "Why am I uncomfortable with science that studies the dead?" I also love the cover by Andrea Carlson. She is super talented, and her notion of museum studies as slightly absurd works nicely with my own worldview.

What do you hope your readers take away from

National Monuments?

I hope they think about how indigenous bodies have been devalued and how female bodies are treated. I also hope they see the absurd humor that I see in the ways we read bones.

What has your journey as a writer been like?

I always wanted to write, since I was a little kid. In high school I managed to get published in *Sun Tracks* magazine, and then I thought I was a writer, so I just kept at it. I went to graduate school, but teaching writing for twenty years is really what made me a writer.

How does being a Minnesotan influence your writing?

There is such enormous support for writing here, and Minnesota is such a beautiful place. This state is perfect for writers. But Minnesota is also my ancestral home, the home of the Ojibway, and that is the biggest reason why I live here.

What is your biggest dream?

Gee, it would be nice to live in a peaceful world where poetry was valued. Personally, I would love to earn the support of a granting foundation so I could just be a writer for a year. That would be wonderful beyond belief!

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A Reading and Discussion Guide Prepared by the Minnesota Book Awards

21ST ANNUAL


MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS

Poetry Winner

Poems by **HEID E. ERDRICH**



NATIONAL MONUMENTS

National Monuments

by Heid E. Erdrich

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS

National Monuments



SUMMARY:

The depths of national identities and the real people who live them are examined through these poems. Many of the poems explore bodies, particularly the bodies of

indigenous women worldwide, as monuments - in life, in photos, in graves, in traveling exhibitions, and in plastic representations at the airport. There are arguments with historians, archaeologists, William Carlos Williams, and the deeply rooted, conflicting myths of what being American is all about.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is the collection's main theme? To what extent do themes and other connections tie the poems together?
2. In what way(s) are bodies monuments?
3. Why does science demand desecration of graves and bones? Is it necessary? Who owns a body after death?
4. What has significance to you as a national monument?
5. What would you want your monument to say?
6. What role does humor play in the collection? Which poem(s) use humor most cleverly and effectively?
7. Do you keep old photos that are not good shots, not good enough for an album? Why or why not?
8. What historical, cultural, and/or scientific insights did you gain in reading the collection?

9. What emotions, images, and memories do the poems conjure up?
10. Which poem speaks most directly or deeply to you, and why?

About Heid E. Erdrich:

A member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibway, Heid Erdrich grew up in Wahpeton, North Dakota. She earned degrees from Dartmouth College and the John Hopkins University Writing Seminars. Heid has been the recipient of two Minnesota State Arts Board fellowships and awards from The Loft Literary Center and the Bush Foundation. In 2008, she and her sister Louise Erdrich cofounded Birchbark House, a nonprofit clearinghouse for indigenous language-centered literature.

In addition to National Monuments, Heid has published two other poetry collections:

The Mother's Tongue, 2005

Fishing for Myth, 1997

For additional information about the author and her work, visit www.heiderdrich.com.



Photo by Scott Strebile



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