

# TEACHING & LEARNING THROUGH **THE BLOCK'S COLLECTION**



# THE NIGHT WATCHMAN

ONE BOOK ONE NORTHWESTERN 2024-2025

“...if you should ever doubt that a series of dry words in a government document can shatter spirits and demolish lives, let this book erase that doubt. Conversely, if you should be of the conviction that we are powerless to change those dry words, let this book give you heart.”

— Louise Erdrich, *The Night Watchman*

## TEACHING THE NIGHT WATCHMAN THROUGH THE BLOCK'S COLLECTION

In *The Night Watchman*, the 2024–25 One Book One Northwestern selection, author Louise Erdrich explores themes of identity, family, and tradition as well as poverty, oppression, and exploitation. Erdrich's novel is based in part on the experiences of her grandfather, Patrick Gourneau, a night watchman in a jewel bearing plant who also fought against House Concurrent Resolution 108. The Resolution would have dissolved recognition of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa's tribal status and dispossessed many of its members of their land

Erdrich's novel takes us back to the early 1950s through the lives of several characters, weaving a complex and interconnected network of events and actions. Erdrich provokes reflection about readers' own personal and family histories, our ties to place and to each other, and our responsibility to learn from and understand our collective histories. Inspired by the book, this selection of artwork from The Block's collection highlights experiences of kinship, rural and urban life, community action, and standing up for one's rights.

We invite members of the Northwestern community and beyond to use these works as opportunities to connect to the text's themes, whether for private contemplation or as a springboard in discussion with others. We include short contextual descriptions of the artworks and suggest some of the ways they connect with ideas in Erdrich's book. We invite you to browse our online collection and see what other works resonate with themes in the book or your own experiences.

We are happy to provide this shareable pdf booklet for teaching and engagement.

You can schedule a class visit to discuss these works in person in The Block's study center by contacting Essi Rönkkö at [essi.ronkko@northwestern.edu](mailto:essi.ronkko@northwestern.edu).

The Block Museum is proud to partner with **One Book One Northwestern** for a year of art and events that explore the themes of this shared text.

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**Shan Goshorn (Eastern Band of Cherokee, 1957–2018)**  
***Cherokee Burden Basket: A Song for Balance***

2012

Arches watercolor paper, archival inks, and acrylic paint

24 x 19 in. (diameter)

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, purchased with a gift from Sandra Lynn Riggs and members of the Block Leadership Circle, 2017.3

Shan Goshorn's *Cherokee Burden Basket* uses texts from documents such as the mission of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, the United States Indian Removal Act (1830), and the Treaty of New Echota (1835). The texts are printed out in strips, or splints, and woven into the traditional form of a burden basket. The baskets are designed to carry heavy loads, and basket weaving is a skill passed down through generations of Cherokee women. In Goshorn's basket, the burdens are both physical and metaphorical. Several of the documents the artist included bring attention to US laws and ideologies that have sought to assimilate Native Americans and to erase their culture. These are balanced with Cherokee cosmological symbols of the four directions and their symbolic colors—red (east), black (west), white (south), and blue (north)—and traditional morning and evening songs that have the potential for healing.

Goshorn's use of governmental and other official texts that document the harm done to Indigenous existence and identity by the US government brings to mind author Louise Erdrich's statement in the afterword to her book, "If you should ever doubt that a series of dry words in a government document can shatter spirits and demolish lives, let this book erase that doubt," and her hopeful reminder, "Conversely, if you should be of the conviction that we are powerless to change those dry words, let this book give you heart."





**Don Getsug (American, born 1942)**  
**Los Velos, Rio Grande Valley, Texas**

1970, printed 2015

Inkjet print

16 x 20 in.

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, purchase with funds donated by Sage Foundation, 2019.1.4

In the 1970s, in the wake of the Johnson Administration's War on Poverty, photographer Don Getsug traveled to economically depressed regions of the country. Getsug was inspired by 1930s photographers who worked for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and who sought to raise awareness of the conditions of poverty in rural America. Here Getsug captures the joy and abandon of childhood, in spite of the children's humble means. The boy on the left is wearing pants that are too short and shoes that are too big but has a broad grin on his face despite the economic hardships.

In *The Night Watchman*, author Louise Erdrich describes the rural Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota where the main characters live. Although they are not wealthy, they fill their homes with love. As one character goes inside the home, he describes his reaction:

*Pokey pushed the door open. When Barnes ducked through, he was shocked. He hadn't understood he was entering a house. The outside of the place looked to Barnes like a rude shelter for animals, the stacked poles plastered with pale yellow mud. But then, even in the dim light, he saw that there were signs of care taken. The table was scrubbed clean. Upon it, a lighted glass lantern glowed.*



Claire (Millman) Mahl Moore (American, 1917–1988)

*Speed Up*

1936

Lithograph

16 3/4 x 23 3/4 in.

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Gift of Louise Dunn Yochim, 1992.1.15

In *Speed Up*, Claire Mahl Moore shows the oppressive environment of a factory. Created in a print shop of the Federal Art Project under the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the 1930s, the print focuses on women laborers. A male boss, shown at a slightly larger scale in the center of the print, lords over the workers. Moore conveys the repetitive nature of the work, rendering the factory environment within a seemingly inescapable circle. Titled *The Treadmill* when the artwork was reproduced in the leftist magazine *New Masses* in 1937, the print highlights the exploitive nature of labor under capitalism, a common subject for Moore and other WPA artists.

In *The Night Watchman*, Louise Erdrich prominently features women employed at a jewel bearing plant on the Turtle Mountain Reservation. While some residents are grateful for the economic opportunities that the plant provides, they are also oppressed by the repetitive nature of their work:

*By the middle of the afternoon, her shoulders began to blaze. Her fingers cramped and her flat ass was numb. The line leaders reminded the women to stand, stretch, and focus their eyes on the distant wall. Then roll their eyes. Focus again on the wall. Once their eyes were refreshed, they worked their hands, flexing their fingers, kneading their swollen knuckles. Then back to the slow, calm, mesmeric toil.*



Cara Romero (American/Chemehuevi, born 1977)  
*Amber Morningstar*, from the series *First American Girl*

2022, printed 2024

Inkjet print, pigment-based

43 1/2 × 39 3/4 in.

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, 2023–2024 Block Museum Student Associates acquisition, purchase funds provided by Craig Ponzio and Block Student Impact Fund, 2024.6.2

In the series *First American Girl*, ara Romero collaborates with the subjects of her portraits to design life-sized doll boxes that insist on the subjects' individuality and tribal heritage. Romero activates her editorial photographic style to subvert the form of the popular American Girl® doll, thereby offering a tool for healing against popular misrepresentations of Native American women. This photograph's namesake, Amber Morningstar, stands proudly within a box framed by a beaded Choctaw sash design that is proprietary to her family. She is surrounded by objects of personal significance. Her hat and gun, in particular, underscore the Choctaw tribe's enduring roots in the southern United States despite their forced relocation from Mississippi to Oklahoma under the US government's 1830 Indian Removal Act.

In *The Night Watchman*, Lloyd Barnes, a white man who teaches math on the reservation, fancies Patrice Paranteau, one of the novel's main characters. He calls her "a darling Indian girl," based on representations he's seen in advertising. Erdrich and Romero both depict Indigenous women as more than simply "darling." Instead, in their works, women exude power. Erdrich, for example, describes Patrice's experience of being named Homecoming queen: "as she felt the weight of the crown, suddenly she wanted them, all of them, to bow to her," an effect akin to Amber Morningstar's commanding presence in Romero's photograph.



W. Eugene Smith (American, 1918–1978)  
*Jean Pearson*, from the series *Theater Girl*, for *Life Magazine*  
1949  
Gelatin silver print  
13 1/2 x 10 3/4 in.  
Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern  
University, Gift of Richard L. Sandor in honor of Julie and  
Penny Sandor, 1986.1.178

In 1949 W. Eugene Smith documented the life of a young actress, Jean Pearson, as she tried to break into show business. For his *Life Magazine* photo essay, Smith photographed Pearson all around New York City, at rehearsals, on the street, in cafes, and at home. This sustained look at a chapter in a person's life serves as an archive of one style of self-presentation at the time.

Set in the early 1950s, *The Night Watchman* pays similar attention to cues about self-presentation and outward appearance from the same time period. Below is an exchange the character Patrice Paranteau has with her mother Zhaanat as Patrice is about to leave for Minneapolis to look for her missing sister:

*...when she stood back, Zhaanat smiled as she took in her daughter's shined shoes, her bright coat, pin-curl-waved hair, red lipstick. Valentine had even lent her gloves.*

*"You look like a white woman," said Zhaanat, in Chippewa.*

*Patrice laughed. They were both pleased at her disguise.*

The passage highlights how individuals sometimes choose to perform identities through appearance and behaviors. While Smith's photographs are supposedly candid, the performative aspect of his subject is similarly apparent. In the passage above, the mother-daughter duo praises Patrice's successful disguise, which masks the painful motivation behind her trip.



Charles Keller (American, 1914–2006)

*People's Meeting*

1942

Color screenprint and crayon with scraping

12 x 17 3/4 in.

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University,  
1995.34

In *People's Meeting*, artist Charles Keller shows people whom he called “ordinary citizens” coming together for a cause. While the artist doesn't specify the cause, the print affirms the fundamental American freedoms of speech and peaceful assembly. Keller shows a mix of people—among them a well-dressed woman, a man in a suit, and another in a collarless shirt—against the backdrop of the American flag. Flyers on a bulletin board in the back are also evidence of community organizing. The grassroots nature of this group reflects a kind of organizing similar to that in *The Night Watchman*.

In *The Night Watchman*, one of the main characters, Thomas Wazhashk, organizes a group of people from the Turtle Mountain Reservation to go to Washington, DC. The tribe's members contribute in different ways to fight against the termination (or “emancipation”) bill, which would have ended federal assistance and recognition of tribal rights. As Erdrich writes,

*E-man-ci-pation. Eman-cipation. This word would not stop banging around in his head. Emancipated. But they were not enslaved. Freed from being Indians was the idea. Emancipated from their land. Freed from the treaties that Thomas's father and grandfather had signed and that were promised to last forever. So as usual, by getting rid of us, the Indian problem would be solved.*

**Dan S. Wang (American, born 1968)**

***This Land Is Your Land***, from the portfolio ***A Ragbox of Overstood Grammars***

2010

Color letterpress on vintage sticker paper

5 1/2 × 3 7/8 in.

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, 2018.7.86

In bold red letters, the word “stolen” visually interrupts the title of Woody Guthrie’s 1940 folk song, “This Land Is Your Land.” With its lyrics praising the natural beauty of the land comprising the United States, Guthrie’s song can certainly be considered patriotic. However, Guthrie embeds sarcastic critiques in his lyrics, in particular as he sings about ignoring a “Private Property” sign while wandering across the country.

Wang picks up on Guthrie’s tongue-in-cheek lyrics with his insertion of the word “stolen.” Through this intervention, Wang reframes the song’s title, invoking the forced displacement of Native Americans to contest the mythology of nation-building in the US. By printing this work on sticker paper, which lends itself to quick, guerrilla-style distribution, Wang underscores the accessible, democratic potential of printmaking, a potential not unlike the communicative power of songwriters like Guthrie.

In her novel *The Night Watchman*, Louise Erdrich tells of Native Americans’ continued fight against land theft. During a meeting with representatives of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa named Eddy Mink suggests that “the services that the government provides to Indians might be likened to rent. The rent for use of the entire country of the United States.” Mink’s comment reframes his tribe’s right to services provided under the reservation system as the least that they are owed for the long, ongoing history of displacement they have faced.





**Tom Jones**

**Amos Kingsley**, from the series *Strong Unrelenting Spirits*

2016

Digital photograph with glass beads and sequins

30 1/2 x 24 in.

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University,

Block Collection Council Fund purchase, 2024.11.1

In recounting his visit as a child to a Sioux (Dakota, Lakota, or Nakota) medicine man, Tom Jones witnessed ancestors appear as “small orbs of light” floating in the room. This experience inspired Jones’s series *Strong Unrelenting Spirits*, in which the artist affixes beads and sequins to his photographs of Ho-Chunk individuals in order “to give a symbolic representation of our ancestors.” Jones surrounds his portrait of Amos Kingsley with beadwork arranged in a Ho-Chunk floral design, visually signifying the pride Jones and Kingsley share in their tribal heritage. The portrait highlights another source of pride for Kingsley, namely his service in the US Navy, signaled by the hat, shirt, and medallion he chose to wear for the photograph.

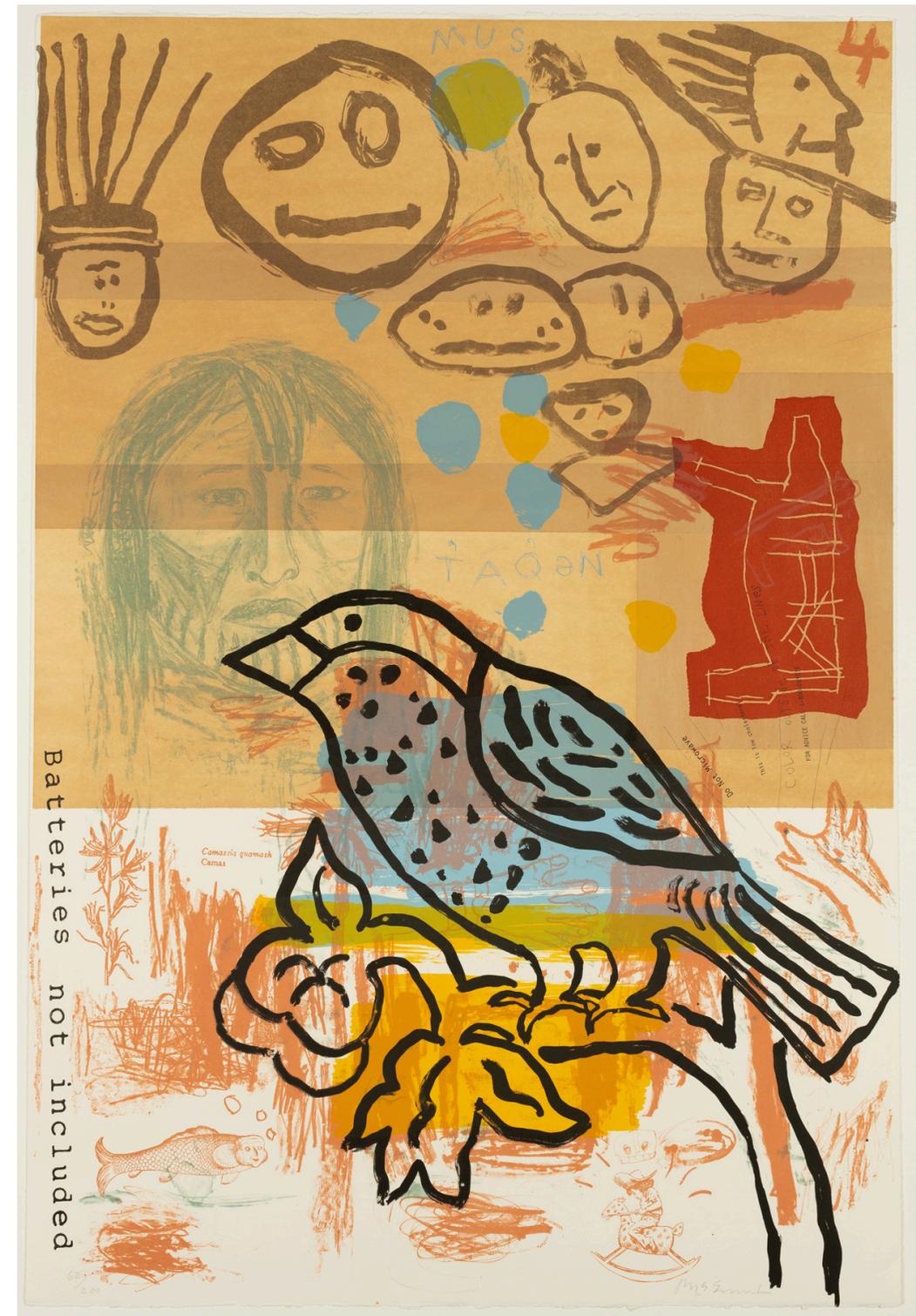
The way Jones documents Kingsley’s tribal heritage alongside his military service prompts reflection on the multifaceted, interwoven experiences in *The Night Watchman*—in particular those of the titular character Thomas Wazhashk. The beadwork surrounding Kingsley parallels encounters that Thomas has with what he calls “star beings.” While watching his daughter Sharlo participate in a parade, Thomas perceives her to be “one of the star beings, given, for her time on earth, human shape and form.” Such encounters with “star beings” motivate Thomas to persist in the fight he organizes against the Congressional resolution that would terminate his tribe’s federal recognition and the services they receive.

**Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (Confederated Salish and Kootenai Nation, born 1940)**  
*Four Directions*  
1995  
Color lithograph on paper  
44 1/2 x 30 in.  
Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, gift of Curated Prints, Ltd., 2000.32.35

In its array of sketches, colors, and text, *Four Directions* seems to contain an entire system of beings and ideas. An infinitude of possible relationships emerges between the print's details, including the child on a rocking horse near the bottom edge, disclaimers like "Do not microwave" and "Batteries not included," and the bird perched on a leafy branch, rendered in thick black lines.

In her artistic practice, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith interprets contemporary social and political issues "through the ideology of Native peoples." This work's title invokes a particular ideology which links each of the four directions to a different facet of life, such as a season of the year, time of day, and stage of human life. Published by the environmental nonprofit organization Greenpeace USA, the print tethers this worldview to activism by Smith and other Indigenous people.

The Four Directions worldview also appears explicitly toward the end of *The Night Watchman*, when one of the main characters, Thomas Wazhashk, has fallen ill after advocating against a Congressional resolution that would end federal recognition of his tribe. Thomas's niece, Patrice, speaks to him with words that "invoked the spirits of the winds that sat in the four directions and the spirits of the animals that came from the four directions. She invited all of these representatives and spirits to enter the room. Time fell away."

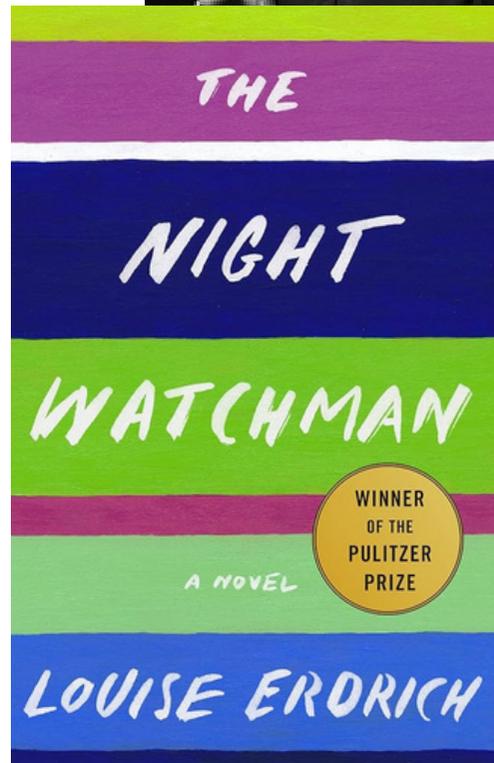


**Chris Pappan (Kaw, Osage, Cheyenne River Sioux, born 1971)**  
***Of White Bread and Miracles (Jiggy)***  
 2020  
 Graphite, ink, map collage, and gold leaf on embossed 1924  
 Evanston municipal ledger  
 18 x 12 in.  
 Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern  
 University, purchase funds provided by the Andra S. and Irwin  
 Press Collections Fund, 2021.10.3

An athletic male body with the head of a bison is immortalized mid-dance. In the series *Of White Bread and Miracles*, artist Chris Pappan challenges the limits of archives. Pappan copied the drawing's central figure from a Boy Scouts of America manual titled *Here is Your Hobby... Indian Dancing and Costumes*, in which Native American dances are stripped of their sacred power, reduced to a badge to be collected. Pappan adopts the form of ledger art, originated in the nineteenth century by Indigenous artists of the Plains, by drawing the reappropriated figure on a page from a 1924 Evanston municipal ledger. The contrast between bright green and royal purple behind the figure as well as the map of the southwestern United States that spans the bottom of the page imbue the static figure with movement, restoring the spiritual power of dance to “undo an erasure,” in Pappan’s words.

In *The Night Watchman*, a work of historical fiction, Louise Erdrich similarly imagines beyond archival limits. Senator Arthur V. Watkins, a historical figure who sought to end federal recognition of Native American tribes through House Concurrent Resolution 108, shares scenes in the novel with Thomas Wazhashk, a fictional counterpart to Erdrich’s grandfather Patrick Gourneau, who fought the Congressional resolution. Erdrich draws from transcripts and letters to depict the understudied fight Gourneau organized against the termination of his tribe, the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa.





## About the Author

Louise Erdrich, a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, is the author of many novels as well as volumes of poetry, children's books, and a memoir of early motherhood. Erdrich's *The Round House* won the National Book Award for Fiction, her novels *Love Medicine* and *LaRose* both received the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction, and her novel,

*The Night Watchman*, won the Pulitzer Prize. Erdrich lives in Minnesota with her daughters and is the owner of Birchbark Books, a small independent bookstore.

More at  
<https://www.northwestern.edu/onebook/>

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