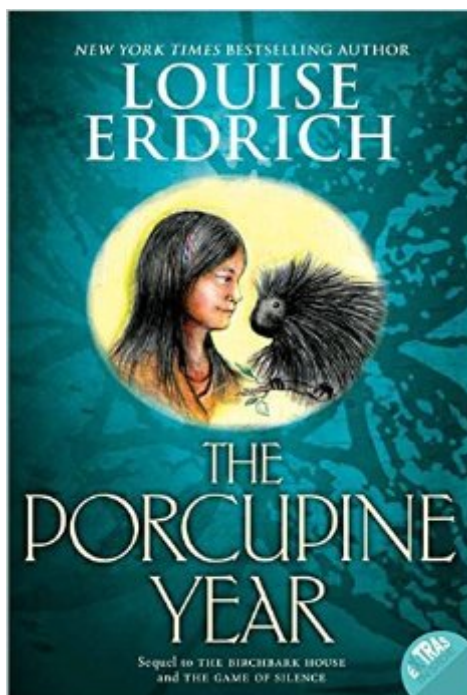


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# The Porcupine Year (Birchbark House)



## Synopsis

Omakayas was a dreamer who did not yet know her limits. When Omakayas is twelve winters old, she and her family set off on a harrowing journey in search of a new home. Pushed to the brink of survival, Omakayas continues to learn from the land and the spirits around her, and she discovers that no matter where she is, or how she is living, she has the one thing she needs to carry her through.

## Book Information

Lexile Measure: 840 (What's this?)

Series: Birchbark House (Book 3)

Paperback: 224 pages

Publisher: HarperCollins; Reprint edition (September 14, 2010)

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Product Dimensions: 5.1 x 0.4 x 7.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 4.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (23 customer reviews)

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[Children's Books > Literature & Fiction > Historical Fiction > United States > 1800s](#) #185

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Age Range: 8 - 12 years

Grade Level: 3 - 7

## Customer Reviews

Louise Erdrich writes [The Birchbark House](#). It becomes a National Book Award Finalist. No surprises there. Louise Erdrich writes [The Game of Silence](#). It does slightly better than its predecessor and wins the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction. Very good, but still not surprising. Now the third book in Erdrich's "Birchbark House books" (surely there's a better name for them, right?) is present and accounted for. The Porcupine Year picks up where the last book left off without a glitch, hitch, or hiccup. Readers who have never read Erdrich's books in this series, or who haven't seen them in a very long time won't need much help in catching up and understanding Erdrich's magnificent world. How far will this latest installment in the chronicles of Omakayas and

her family go? It remains to be seen. The only thing I can say with certainty is that *The Porcupine Year* does not disappoint. It gives the series a richness and fullness it might not have had before. It's 1852 and 12-year-old Omakayas and her Ojibwe family are traveling west to escape the expansion of the white settlers encroaching on their land. In trying to decide where to go next, the family and their companions must choose a route. At last they decide to go north to be reunited with family there. All too soon the trip turns more perilous than anyone expected. There are other tribes to avoid, lost children to take care of, fires to escape, and a traitor whose actions bring about the death of a beloved character. Still, through it all Omakayas keeps a clear head and a loving heart. An Author's Note at the end offers additional information on the Ojibwe language and its many dialects. A glossary provides pronunciations and definitions of Ojibwe terms.

How do you recount a story about a people in dire peril of losing their way of life without making the book deeply, deathly, oppressively depressing? Some people would go the opposite direction and try to stuff the book full of false hopes and forced cheer. Credit Erdrich with indulging in none of this. Which is not to say that the book isn't often funny. As always, she has a sense of humor and what I liked most about *The Porcupine Year* was how that sense of the absurd filters in right from the start. At the beginning of the book Omakayas's brother Pinch gets a faceful of porcupine quills (the accompanying picture is worth the cover price alone). Then, when he and Omakayas return home to find their family convinced that the kids are dead, the boy has the audacity to suggest that it would be a perfect time for the siblings to cover themselves in flour and pretend that they are ghosts of themselves. That right there sets the tone for the rest of the book. On the one hand you have people dealing with very real issues and grief too huge to name. On the other hand, you have characters that key into the wonderful absurdity of life. You have people like Pinch who aren't afraid to get a little profane, even when people's hearts are panting on the floor (to steal a phrase). And an author who can strike that balance and strike it well is an author you should keep a close eye on. You never know where they're going to lead you next.

What also helps the book along is Erdrich's sense of how people really are and how they act when they're under stress. Sometimes you see the best in them, but more often than not you get all their insecurities and concerns on parade for everyone to see. There's a wonderful moment when Pinch (now Quill) is returned from a capture by his father Deydey that puts his mother's emotions on perfect display. Look at how Erdrich describes the scene. "Yellow Kettle always confused her affection with anger, and even as she put her head against Deydey's chest, she gave a furious shake of her hand at Quill and cuffed at him before he darted away." These little details make the book worth reading. I love the loving insults Omakayas and her brother throw at one another in the morning and how much she misses them when he gets

distracted with other matters. As with the "Little House" books (a series these books are often compared to), the characters in Erdrich's world learn and grow. I'm going to be sad indeed when Quill is too old to pull pranks and drive his sister nuts. Or when Two Strike isn't a headstrong hellion anymore. As with the previous books there's plenty of hardship, pain, and sorrow to this series. Yet there's always that tempering of the bleak with hope. The Porcupine Year serves to satisfy old fans and lure in new ones. Wherever Omakayas's journey takes her, we'll be poor indeed if we can't come along. A worthy companion piece.

Omakayas, or Little Frog, is now twelve winters old. Her family, members of the Ojibwe tribe, have been forced from their homes on the Island of the Golden-Breasted Woodpecker, and are now making the long journey to Lac Du Bois, where members of her extended family are living. Omakayas and her family face many hardships throughout their journey. Omakayas and her brother, Quill, are almost killed in the rushing waters of a swollen river; their provisions for winter are stolen by an evil French trapper; and Old Tallow, Omakayas' elder, dies in a battle with a bear. Omakayas also becomes a woman during the hard winter they endure in the forest. Through all of this, Omakayas discovers first love, the great power of storytelling, and her own inner strength. THE PORCUPINE YEAR is the third installment in Erdrich's series of Omakayas and her family. Those who have read the first two novels will be happily reunited with the main character and follow her on new adventures. The chapters are short and flow well together. The illustrations also add to the humor and drama of the story. Erdrich states in her author's note that Omakayas' story will continue into a fourth novel set in the 1860's. I am sure fans of the series will be excited to see what becomes of Omakayas as she continues her journey into adulthood. Reviewed by: LadyJay

In Louise Erdrich's third novel about the joys and sorrows of a family of Ojibwe during the mid-19th century, Omakayas, the heroine of the series, is 12 winters old and feels caught in an in-between place: "She was that creature somewhere between a child and a woman --- a person ready to test her intelligence, her hungers. A dreamer who did not yet know her limits. A hunter, like her brother, who was beginning to possess the knowledge of all that moved and breathed. A friend who did not know how far her love might extend. A daughter who still winced at her mother's commands and who loved and shyly feared her distant father. A girl who'd come to know something of her strength and who wanted challenge, and would get it." Omakayas's in-betweenness is mirrored by the exile of her family. After being pushed off Lake Superior's Madeline Island (the Island of the Golden-Breasted Woodpecker) by the United States government in order to make room for white

settlers, Omakayas's family is on the move, hoping to rejoin the rest of their extended family near the Lake of the Woods in northern Minnesota. Their journey is fraught with dangers and marked by growing responsibilities for Omakayas and her younger brother, Pinch. The novel opens with an alternating harrowing and humorous episode, which begins with the siblings losing control of their canoe in a rapid-filled river and culminates with Pinch's painful encounter with a porcupine. The boy's connection to the porcupine, which becomes his close companion, also results in his renaming as Quill. With his new name seems to come a new, more mature personality, as Omakayas's bad-mouthed, troublemaking little brother continues to exhibit new thoughtfulness, maturity and skill as a hunter and trapper. Omakayas also must discover new skills and strengths, particularly in the face of adversity. After a devastating robbery leaves her party without food or supplies just at the start of the long, cold winter, Omakayas is forced to call on all her resources to help her family avoid starvation. Dangers abound --- from the black bears who are just as hungry as the Ojibwe to the bands of Bwaanag (Lakota) whose plain hunting grounds the Ojibwe travel near. By the end of their journey, Omakayas is older, wiser, perhaps a bit sadder after several losses, but also many steps closer to being a woman and not a little girl. Like Omakayas and her family, THE PORCUPINE YEAR spends time looking backwards --- to the idyllic days on the Island of the Golden-Breasted Woodpecker --- and forward. The emphasis, however, is on the future. The novel drops hints about the girl's spiritual callings and future loves and closes Omakayas's ceremony marking her physical maturity as a woman. Readers will look forward to participating in Omakayas's continued transformation into a woman and a respected, full member of her community.---

Reviewed by Norah Piehl

I'm so grateful to Ms. Erdrich for this series. My seven year old granddaughter and I read them together, and it is clear from her expressions and her continued desire to hear just one more chapter, that the stories resonate with her. They are a great mix of history (often heartbreaking) and human dynamics, and a view into what for our family, is a different way of approaching the spirituality of everyday living.

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