



Recommendation of Debra Magpie Earling for Honorary Doctorate

2026 Spring Commencement



August 11, 2025

President Seth Bodnar
The University of Montana
Missoula, MT 59812

Dear President Bodnar,

It is my pleasure and privilege to recommend Debra Magpie Earling (Professor Emerita) for an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Montana. Debra's distinguished record as a teacher, writer, and mentor qualifies her an exceptional candidate for this honor.

Debra Magpie Earling taught Creative Writing and Native America Studies at the University of Montana for over thirty years. Her students appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list, won the Pulitzer Prize, served as Montana Poet Laureate, and were selected for the *Good Morning America* Book Club. Former students and mentees continue to publish widely and with distinction and Debra remains in frequent contact with many of her students and serves as a generous reader and mentor. Earling is an inspiration and excellent role model for any writer and artist, and particularly so for young Native and women writers.

Debra Magpie Earling's novels, *Perma Red* and *The Lost Journals of Sacajewea*, both won the American Book Award. She was the youngest writer included in *The Last Best Place: A Montana Anthology* and her subsequent work has validated that early promise and recognition. Earling is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Literary Fellowship, Guggenheim Fellowship, and Montana Governor's Artist Award among many other awards. Her work has been widely translated and featured at the Missoula Art Museum, Beinecke Library at Yale University, and the Center for Book Arts in New York City.

Earling's service record is equally impressive. She has served as a judge for the PEN/Faulkner Award in Fiction, the National Book Award, and the Institute of American Indian Arts Indigenous Fiction Prize. She has traveled globally as an ambassador for the U.S. State Department and presented at the Étonnants Voyageurs Festival in St. Malo, France. Earling directed the University of Montana's prestigious Master of Fine Arts Creative Writing Program and fostered new partnerships resulting in fundraising campaigns that continue to yield substantial donations. Her collaboration with master printer Peter Koch was instrumental in the establishment of our burgeoning Book Arts program.

I recommend Debra Magpie Earling for an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Montana with enthusiasm and without reservation. Her lasting and growing contributions to American arts and letters, her continuing influence as an educator, mentor, and role model, and as an artistic ambassador and advocate for the Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes of the Flathead Nation,

the University of Montana, and the State of Montana merits this honor. In short, I have difficulty imagining a more deserving candidate. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Robert Stubblefield
Lecturer; Director of BFA in Creative Writing
Director of UM Press
Department of English
University of Montana

Carol, Erin & Whitney Williams

August 18, 2025

Honorary Degree Committee
University of Montana
32 Campus Dr
Missoula, MT 59812

To the Honorary Degree Selection Committee,

We write with genuine enthusiasm to recommend our friend of over three decades, **Debra Magpie Earling**, for an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Montana. The University of Montana is an institution she has long cherished and uplifted through her work. Debra's influence as an award winning author, beloved educator, and Indigenous advocate reaches far beyond the classroom or the printed page. Her novels ***Perma Red*** and ***The Lost Journals of Sacajawea*** have become touchstones, not just for their lyrical prose but for the way she centers Native experiences, complex histories, and identities with fierce, unwavering compassion. Debra was among the most sought after professors, including for Erin and Whitney.

What sets Debra apart is not just her remarkable literary achievements, but her dedication to cultivating a sense of belonging in academic and creative spaces on campus and beyond. Her writing and teaching nurtures deep and profound connection and understanding, including for students who might feel unseen or unheard. Her life-long commitment to elevating Indigenous narratives is matched by her humility, her power, and her genuine affection for communities.

Awarding Debra Magpie Earling an Honorary Doctorate would recognize her extraordinary contributions to literature, cultural understanding, and the University of Montana. UM graduates would be proud if our alma mater chose to bestow such an honor on this remarkable Indigenous leader. **Debra's empathy, authenticity, and respect for diverse traditions align deeply with the mission of the University of Montana.**

Our family, including our late Dad/husband, Congressman Pat Williams, admire countless individuals, but we can think of *no one* who has been more transformative to each of us personally, and our community, than Debra Magpie Earling.

Thank you for considering Debra for this high honor.

Former Senator Carol Williams

carol@williamsformontana.com

Montana's First Female Senate Majority and Minority Leader

Erin Williams, Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor

erinwilliamslcpc@gmail.com

UM Class of 1992, History & Political Science with Minor in German

UM Class of 2002, Masters in Counselor Education

Whitney Williams, Founder & CEO, williamsworks, Founder, Full Glow

whitney@williamsworks.com

UM Class of 1994, Political Science with Minors in Native American & Wilderness Studies

Mandy Smoker Broaddus
2023 UM Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters Recipient
611 Jackson Street
Helena, MT 5960

To Seth Bodnar, President of the University of Montana

Debra Magpie Earling, a cherished friend, dedicated teacher and mentor, and exceptional Indigenous leader, has already cemented her legacy as one of the greatest authors of her generation. I have known Debra for over twenty years and have witnessed her profound impact on literature, the students she has taught, her CSKT community, and our state and region.

Her remarkable talent, passion for storytelling, and commitment to craft are marked by her authenticity and bravery. Reclaiming Native our voice and narrative is essential to taking back our creative agency and reorienting power and historical truths for the betterment of future generations. Debra has helped forge this path and made the load a little lighter for the countless people she has inspired, including me.

Debra's novels *Perma Red* and *The Lost Journals of Sacajewea* have both received critical acclaim. Her writing features evocative prose, compelling narratives, and deeply drawn characters. *Perma Red* received the Western Writers Association Spur Award for Best Novel of the West and was recognized as one of the Great American Novels. *The Lost Journals of Sacajewea* challenges historical narratives and highlights the experiences of Indigenous women, specifically in establishing a voice for the great unsung heroine of the Lewis and Clark journey, Sacajewea. Her work explores themes of resilience, identity, and the human spirit.

During her tenure at the University of Montana, Debra has been an exceptional mentor and teacher, providing invaluable guidance and support. She fostered intellectual curiosity and artistic exploration, encouraging students and mentees to develop their craft. She offers wisdom, empathy, and practical expertise, providing incisive feedback while building confidence and nurturing creativity. Debra was always truly invested in the success and well-being of her students and mentees.

Debra's passion for storytelling and knowledge of Native American studies and literature enriches her teaching and mentorship. Her ability to inspire and empower others to explore their creative potential is unparalleled. As a friend, she is insightful, supportive and generous. Debra Magpie Earling is an individual of exceptional talent, dedication, and integrity. I can think of no other who I would recommend as highly for the Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from our great institution.

Sincerely,
Mandy Smoker Broadus

10 August 2025

Chris Dombrowski
Director of Creative Writing
University of Montana
christopher.dombrowski@mso.umt.edu

Dear President Bodnar:

I am writing in euphoric support of the nomination of acclaimed novelist, professor emerita, and member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes Debra Magpie Earling for an Honorary Doctorate Degree from the University of Montana. I cannot think of a more deserving, impressive and inspiring candidate for the award.

As a graduate of UM's MFA Program, as current Director of Creative Writing, and as the author of five books, I would like to speak to the profound and lasting impact of Debra's written work, as well as her visionary mentorship in her role as professor of Creative Writing at UM, where she served until her retirement as a cherished instructor to scores of promising students, some of whom would later become our most notable MFA graduates, such as Pulitzer-winner Andrew Sean Greer.

First published in 2002 by Penguin/Putnam, Debra's debut novel *Perma Red*, instantly established her as one of the most important writers of her generation. Propelled by a gritty lyricism and an unforgettable protagonist, the timeless novel's astounding initial impact was reputation-forging (the novel won several national awards including the American Book Award), but perhaps even more impressive has its sustained resonance. Over the years the book became considered a seminal novel of the West, was translated into several languages, and was recently republished by vaunted independent publisher Milkweed Editions, prompting *The Atlantic* named the book one of "the great American novels of the last 100 years." *Perma Red* is also under development and pre-production as a feature film by producer Lynn-Woods Fields.

Over the course of two decades following the publication of her debut, Debra received over fifteen significant national and regional distinctions, including fellowships from the NEA and the Guggenheim Foundation. She received the Montana Governor's Artist Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Montana Arts. She judged the prestigious PEN/Faulkner Award. She presented her work in countless venues nationally and internationally, even lecturing for the U.S. State Department in Turkey. She served as an activist for missing and murdered Indigenous women. All of which is to say Debra amassed a lifetime's worth of distinctions even before she published her second novel, *The Lost Journals of Sacajawea*.

While the publication of a true breakthrough novel such as *Perma Red* puts a writer in rarefied air, the release of a follow up that expounds thematically on and even eclipses the vast vision of a triumphant debut is an even rarer accomplishment. Published in 2024 by Milkweed Editions, *The Lost Journals*, which in the words of its publisher "brings (the mythologized figure of

Sacajawea) vividly to life, casting unsparing light on the men who brutalized her and recentering (her) as the arbiter of her own history,” won The Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award, The American Book Award, and The Montana Book Award, and was praised everywhere from The New York Times to The Millions, from The Los Angeles Times to NPR. Not since James Welch’s monumental *Fools Crow* has such an immersive work of narrative genius risen out of the West. In luminous, image-laden prose, as if by way of elemental reconstitution, *The Lost Journals* awakens a voice that our American mythology had hoped would stay sleeping, and in so doing unearths a harrowing—though ultimately triumphant—once-in-a-generation work of art.

In closing, I would like to reiterate my enthusiastic support of the nomination of Debra Magpie Earling for an Honorary Doctorate from UM. The Creative Writing Program is deeply indebted to Debra’s formative contributions as a professor, and the contemporary Montana literary community would without her work be without its polestar. Debra has honored this state and our university with a wisdom, intelligence, and humanity that is nonpareil—this honor would only further cement her reputation as one of the most important writers of her generation.

Sincerely,

Chris Dombrowski

Debra Magpie Earling is the author of the novels *Perma Red* and *The Lost Journals of Sacajewea*, long listed for the Andrew Carnegie Medal, and winner of the 2023 Montana Book Award, and the 2024 American Book Award. *Perma Red* received the Mountain & Plains Bookseller Association Award, Spur Award for Best Novel of the Year, Medicine Pipe Bearer's Award from the Western Writers' Association, Montana Honor Book Award, American Book Award, WILLA Award from Women Writing the West, and a Washington State Book Award. She is the recipient of a Montana Governor's Arts Award and has received both a Guggenheim and NEA fellowship. The Atlantic Monthly recently listed *Perma Red* as one of the Great American Novels of the last 100 years. She has served as a judge for the PEN/Faulkner Literary Award and is currently a judge for the National Book Award in fiction. She was named professor emerita at the University of Montana. She is Bitterroot Salish and a citizen and member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes of the Flathead Nation.

Resume (in brief)

List of Publications, Exhibits, Reference Articles, etc.

- *Perma Red (Feature Film)* In Development/Pre-Production, Lynn-Wood Fields, Producer, • Updated 03/24/2025.
- *Unfolding Events: Exploring Past and Present in Artists' Books* at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. The exhibition will be on view from September 2, 2025, through March 1, 2026
- *The Lost Journals of Sacajewea*, Milkweed Editions, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2023.
- *The Lost Journals of Sacajewea*, Peter Koch Printers, Berkeley, California, 2009.
- *Perma Red*. Novel. New York: Penguin/Putnam, BlueHen Press, June 2002.
- *Le Rebelde*, Portugese Translation of *Perma Red*, 2006.
- *Louise*, French Translation of *Perma Red*. Editions, (Paris: Albin Michel, 2004).
- *The Lost Journals of Sacajewea Exhibits*: Seager Gray Gallery, San Francisco, CA. 2014; International Codex Foundation, Berkeley, CA.; San Francisco Center for the Book, San Francisco, CA. 2011; Missoula Art Museum, Missoula, MT; *The Art of the Book*, "Book as Witness: The Artist's Response," Center for the Book Arts, New York City, NY. 2010.
- *Article* Kwasny, Melissa. "Ghost Dance: The Poetics of Loss." *The American Poetry Review*, March/April. 2015: 11-19. Print

Works in Progress

- Spirit Days: Memoir.
- *Medicine Woman Warrior* [working title], novel.
- *Titanic Days* [working title], novel.
- *W i t c h*: *Day Come White, Night Come Black*; a book series tetralogy.

Recognition and Awards

- The Montana Book Award, *The Lost Journals of Sacajewea*, 2024.
- Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award, 2024.
- Montana Governor's Artist Award, Outstanding Contribution to the Montana Arts, June 2015.

- Guggenheim Fellowship, 2007.
- National Endowment of the Arts, Literary Fellowship, 2006.
- Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers' Series 2002.
- Mountain & Plains Bookseller Association Award for, 2003.
- Spur Award from the Western Writers' Association for Best Novel of the Year
- Medicine Pipe Bearer's Award From the Western Writers' Association for Best First Novel, 2003.
- The Honor Book Award From the Montana Committee For the Humanities, 2003.
- **The American Book Award 2003, 2024.**
- The WILLA Award from Women Writing the West, 2003.
- The Washington State Book Award, 2003.
- The Lawrence Foundation Award for Best Short Story of the Year, "Real Indians," Prairie Schooner, 2004.

Brief List of Invitational Reading, Lectures & Workshops

- Writer-in-Residence, Elk River Indigenous Writers Workshop, Livingston, MT, August 2025.
- Desert Nights, Rising Stars Writers Conference, Speaker, Tempe, AZ., October 2024.
- Sewanee Writers Conference, Teacher, Speaker, Sewanee, TN., July 2024.
- Montana Women Vote, Keynote Speaker, Helena, MT., February 2024.
- Kachemak Bay Writers' Conference, Speaker, Teacher, Homer, AK., May 2024.
- Flathead River Writers, Keynote presenter, September 2024.
- Paris Gibson Square Museum of Art, Speaker, Great Falls, MT., September 2023.
- Hearth: A Global Conversation on Community, Identity, and Place: Carl Safina, Chigozie Obioma, Debra Earling, Chico, MT. 2019.
- Missing Murdered Indigenous Women: Speaker, Community Gathering, Missoula, MT. 2018.
- Amherst College, Lecture and Reading, Amherst, MA., 2018.
- Perma Red: Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes, Stories & Community Building, Polson, MT., 2018.
- Jaipur Literature Festival, Boulder, CO., 2015.
- Institute of American Indian Art, Reading and Craft Lecture, Santa Fe, NM., 2014, 2025.
- Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, Michigan, Reading & Lecture, MI., 2014.
- International Codex Conference, Feature Lecture, Berkeley, CA., 2011.
- U.S. State Department: Turkey, Lectures Presentations, Readings, Alanya; Akdeniz University, Atalya; Dokus Eylul University, Ege University, American Culture and Lit/English Language and Literature Department; Izmir; Keynote Speaker "Native American Voices: Tribal Echoes," Conference at Hacettepe University, Ankara, Media Interviews, Istanbul, 2011.

Service

- Institute of American Indian Arts, Judge for Indigenous Fiction Prize, 2025.
- National Book Award, Judge, New York City, November 2025.
- Pen/Faulkner Award, Judge, (delivered citation to Phillip Roth for *Everyman*), Washington, D.C., 2007.