

COMMENTARY

SUMMARIES OF 8 NOVELS

Louise Erdrich

(1954-)

“First-time readers of Louise Erdrich’s novels almost invariably find them both fascinating and difficult.... *Love Medicine* is a special case...because Erdrich issued it twice. The shorter, first version appeared in 1984. Then in 1993 she published an expanded version, with four new chapters and several smaller changes....

Love Medicine (1984; rev. 1993)

Several Ojibwe and Cree families (with some Anglo blood mixed in) struggle with love, survival, and their own personalities in modern North Dakota. There are at least three generations and at least ten important characters. First generation: Nector, Marie, Lulu; second generation: Gerry, Gordie, June, Henry, Jr.; third generation: Albertine, Lipsha, King. Because this novel was constructed of a number of short stories, it is almost impossible to give a meaningful plot summary of the whole.... The theme of love is important in this novel, from the title to the last line, where June is brought home.... Is Catholicism a positive, a negative, or a neutral presence? Is it a poison or medicine to the people? In what ways does it intersect or conflict with a more Native or ‘natural’ religion?... What alternative medicines are there to the love medicine of the title?....

The Beet Queen (1986)

Most of the central characters in this loosely structured novel are Anglo men and women who live in and around Argus, North Dakota. The narrative begins when the three children of Mr. Ober and Adelaide Adare are separated from their father, who dies, and their mother, who abandons them. Karl, Mary, and Jude are then separated from one another and spend the rest of the novel not quite getting back together again. A parallel plot involves the birth of Wallacette to Celestine James. Wallacette, who goes by the name of Dot, becomes the Beet Queen at the end of the novel. Another important character is Sita Kozka, whose various misadventures end in her death.... The novel begins in abandonment, when Mr. Ober commits suicide and leaves his illegitimate family with no home or means of support.... On one level *The Beet Queen* is about varieties of parenting, particularly mothering.... Karl and Wallace are both gay... Mary is revered as a miracle-producing saint, but at times she seems more like a witch with hands that glow in the dark.... Is there a functional contrast between her and Fleur or between her and Sister Leopolda, other possible witch-saints?.... Are we to laugh at Sita’s failed businesses and marriages and even at her strange career as a corpse?....

Tracks (1988)

The events in *Tracks* take place before most of those in *Love Medicine*, but several of the characters will seem familiar: Lulu, Eli, and Nector, for example, appear, as do some other familiar names, like Pillager, Lazarre, and Morrissey. The more central characters are Nanapush and Pauline, who in alternate chapters tell the story of Fleur, Lulu’s mother.... Note carefully all references to tracks, footprints, shoes, paws, walking, and so on... Are Pauline and Fleur murderers?.... Are we supposed to come away from this novel hating Christians and loving a more Native or natural religion or spirituality?.... Trees speak, groan, crack, whine, and slam against the earth. Do the trees somehow stand for Indians? What about the final big scene, where Fleur cuts a mess of them down before the Turcot Company takes the rest?....

The Bingo Palace (1994)

The novel starts with Gerry Nanapush escaping from jail again and Lulu sending a copy of his WANTED picture to Lipsha, who returns to the reservation. Lipsha falls in love with Shawnee Ray Toose. Lyman Lamartine, who also loves Shawnee Ray, sets plans in motion to transform the land near Matchimanito Lake into a casino. The novel ends with Lipsha stranded in a car in a terrible blizzard—

reminiscent of the snowfall that opens *Love Medicine*. Will he, like his mother June, freeze to death?... This novel continues the use of what are sometimes called supernatural features—visions, strange voices, ghosts, spirits, lake monsters, unexplained ways of knowing.... Lipsha seems to grow in the course of this novel—from a derelict at the start to a baby-saving hero at the end.... Do you think he will get the girl at the end, or is he essentially a dead man walking?... There [are] a lot of mother-child relationships in the novel: Zelda-Albertine, June-Lipsha, Shawnee Ray-Redford, Lulu-Gerry.... The most prominent comic scene is the vision-quest skunk....

Tales of Burning Love (1996)

Jack Mauser turns out to be the real name of Andy, the mud engineer who tries to seduce June at the start of *Love Medicine*. After his encounter with June, Jack has a string of lovers and four wives: Eleanor Schlick, a professor; Candace Pantamouny, a dentist; Marlis Cook, an entertainer; and Dot Adare Nanapush, wife of the convict Gerry Nanapush. Plagued by debts and woman troubles, Jack half-stages his own death when his house burns down, though he secretly escapes. Meanwhile, his four surviving widows attend his funeral. After the funeral, they are caught in a car in a blizzard. To keep one another awake, they tell true tales, mostly about their relationships with Jack Mauser.... The focal character, Jack, seems through most of the novel to be hopelessly boyish and immature and is even accused by one of his future wives of being a 'sexual Neanderthal'.... Eleanor is something of a sexual predator, even seducing one of her undergraduate students.... Consider the various kinds of burning in the novel and the varieties of 'burning love.' How does Jack's having been a fireman figure in? June's death by freezing? Jack's house burning? The quality of his love for his various wives?....

The Antelope Wife (1998)

When Scranton Roy's regiment attacks a quiet Indian village in Minnesota, he murders several Indians and then deserts with an Indian baby whom he raises—until she runs off and finally joins a deer herd. The descendants of that soldier and that baby meet many generations later in modern-day Minneapolis. Cally Roy interacts with her mother, Rozin, and her twin grandmothers, Zosie and Mary, who had much earlier shared sexual relations with the grandson of Scranton Roy. Rozin's marriage with Richard Whiteheart Beads ends unhappily, but Rozin eventually finds a more enduring bond with Frank Shawano, who has spent much of his life trying to perfect the recipe for a wonderful cake called a *blitzkuchen*. The novel ends with a metaphor of beads as life—elements capable of different designs and configurations.... This novel seems clearly to be about women. Is it true, as some reviewers have suggested, that the men are pasteboard characters, almost caricatures, who never reveal themselves to us in any depth?... Why does Erdrich give us so many animal-connected people the Antelope Wife of the title (presumably Sweetheart Calico), talking dogs, woman-suckling puppies, porcupine men? Is there some sort of we-are-all-one-species message here?...

The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse (2001)

In 1996, Father Damien Modeste, after almost a century with the Ojibwe, writes to the pope to confess that he has been a fraudulent priest. Intertwined with the life of this she-he priest are the lives of familiar characters like Lulu, Marie, Margaret, Fleur, Nanapush, Nector, and Napoleon, as well as some new characters like Father Wekkle and Mary Kashpaw. We learn how a young woman named Agnes DeWitt becomes a nun who has a sexual obsession with playing the piano, then a farmer's common-law wife, then a bank robber's hostage, and finally a priest at a reservation called Little No Horse. At about the same time that Father Damien is writing to the pope, Father Jude Miller comes to Little No Horse on a mission from the Vatican to investigate the miraculous life of the recently deceased Sister Leopolda.... Do you find Father Damien to be an attractive character?... Does it bother you that he is an imposter, a thief, a liar? He easily forgives others their sins; can we forgive his affair with another priest and his spending stolen money on a Steinway?... Father Damien goes to Little No Horse to convert the Ojibwe to Catholicism. By the end, has he nearly become converted to the traditional Ojibway practices he set out to replace?... In this novel a passionate woman spends most of her life impersonating an unpassionate man.... Do you find Nanapush as attractive a character as Father Damien does? Is he, like his namesake Nanabozho, a trickster figure of mythological proportions, or is he just a funny, oversexed, foolish, and wise old man?...

The Master Butchers Singing Club (2003)

The novel begins just after World War I with the arrival in the United States of a young German sniper named Fidelis Waldvogel, who becomes a butcher in Argus. He is soon joined by his wife, Eva, and her son, Franz, and Fidelis and Eva proceed to have three more sons—Markus, Erich, and Emil. All four sons eventually become soldiers in World War II, but on different sides. Other Argus characters are involved in an intersecting plot. Delphine, the daughter of the town drunk Roy Watzka, has a long-term relationship with Cyprian Lazarre, who turns out to be gay. Other Argus characters are an undertaker named Clarisse, who seems to be involved with the deaths of a family in Roy Watzka’s cellar, and a repulsive sheriff who loves her but whom she disembowels.

The novel ends with surprising revelations about who the mother of Delphine really is.... Love takes many forms in this novel. A gay gymnast loves a straight woman, or does he? A sheriff loves an undertaker, or does he? A drunkard loves a ragpicker, or does he? A butcher loves his best friend’s widow and then the woman who nurses her, or does he?.... A baby is delivered into an outhouse; a boy almost suffocates in a womb hand dug in an earth mound; a butcher has no time for his sons; Indian babies are murdered by soldiers at Wounded Knee.... Think particularly about the opposition between Fidelis and Cyprian, the way the Waldvogel boys wind up on opposite sides in World War II, and the outcomes of their enlistments.... Delphine makes several statements about God’s failures. Do you agree with her that God is a drunken lout?”

Peter G. Beidler
“Study Guides to Eight Erdrich Novels”
Approaches to Teaching the Works of Louise Erdrich
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Michael Hollister (2015)