

7 CRITICS DISCUSS

Louise Erdrich

(1954-)

“I don’t think American Indian literature should be distinguished from mainstream literature. Setting it apart and saying that people with special interest might read this literature sets Indians apart too.” (1985) “I would rather that Native American writing be seen as American writing, that all of the best writing of any ethnic group here would be included in American writing. These are university-inspired divisions so that people can have courses and concentrate on certain areas.” (1988)

Louise Erdrich
Interviews

“Louise Erdrich is recognized as one of the most talented novelists of her generation. Her first novel, *Love Medicine*, won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction. The subject matter of most of her work—the life of Native Americans from roughly the turn of the century to the present—has rarely been treated in contemporary literature, bringing added significance to Erdrich’s exceptional skill as a writer of fiction. Erdrich was born in Little Falls, Minnesota...and was reared near the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reservation in North Dakota.

The reservation provides the setting for *Love Medicine* and for portions of her subsequent work. Her mother, a Chippewa, and her father, who was German-born, both worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and Erdrich’s maternal grandparents lived on the reservation. She often visited them during her childhood. Erdrich is a graduate of Dartmouth College, where she met her husband and collaborator, Michael Dorris. He, too, is part Native American; he heads the Native American Studies Program at Dartmouth and is a published novelist and scholar of Native American studies. Each acknowledges the other as an active collaborator in the writing of their novels. Erdrich also has a master’s degree in creative writing from The Johns Hopkins University.

Erdrich’s novels employ multiple points of view to tell their stories. They are interrelated, comprising the first three volumes of a planned tetralogy; characters appear or are referred to from novel to novel. The themes of all three focus on the struggle to create and maintain some semblance of joy and productivity in lives lived out against a backdrop of suffering, deprivation, and loss as a culture. The order in which the novels were published is not the order in which the events occur. *Tracks*, published third, comes first in chronological order of events. *The Beet Queen* is second in both publication date and chronology of events. *Love Medicine*, published first, brings the characters closest to the present time. *Tracks* establishes the conflicts central to Erdrich’s body of work: the traditions and customs of Native American culture as their practitioners struggle to preserve them in the face of the encroaching white world; the tensions between males and females; the frightening power of the Roman Catholic church and the potential for disaster and cruelty when that power is abused; and the mysterious and finally inexplicable powers of the spirit, especially the power of love—sexual, paternal, familial.

The narrators of *Tracks* are Nanapush, a voice of ancient wisdom and modern confusion, and Pauline, a young woman confused by sexuality, the ancient Indian traditions, and the pull of Catholicism. The character around whom their point-counterpoint unfolding of events revolves is Fleur Pillager, lover, wife, mother, and fierce protector of all that she cherishes of the old ways and her present life. Fleur is believed to possess supernatural powers. She is the love of Eli Kashpaw’s life and mother of Lulu Lamartine. In *Love Medicine*, Lulu and Eli’s younger brother, Nector, are lovers. The novel deals with the conflict within Nector over his role in tribal affairs and his inability to resolve his personal life. He is married to Marie Lazzare, and they are the parents of many children, yet he cannot resist the pull of Lulu, his first love.

In *The Beet Queen*, the story focuses on a different family, the Adares. They are not Native Americans, but they live near the same reservation that is the setting for the other novels. Karl and Mary Adare are orphaned when their mother abandons them. They flee to the family of her sister, who runs a butcher shop

near the reservation in Argus, North Dakota. Eventually, Karl fathers a child by Celestine James, a mixed-blood Chippewa. That child, Dot Adare, is the beet queen of the title. She eventually marries Gerry Nanapush, the delinquent son of Lulu Lamartine, bringing the separate worlds of reservation and town together.

Critics have considered Erdrich a first-class contemporary writer from the time of *Love Medicine*'s publication. They most often cite the importance of her treatment of a subject previously unexamined by American novelists and her exemplary style as reasons for that prominence. Almost unanimously, critics praise her work for transcending the limitations associated with the label 'ethnic literature.' Her style is usually described as lyrical and poetic. (Her collection of poems, *Jacklight*, was named one of the ten best books of 1984 by the *San Francisco Chronicle*.) Some critics are bothered by her somewhat ragged intercutting of viewpoints in *Love Medicine*, but that technique is less problematic in *The Beet Queen*, which proceeds in clearer chronological order, and in *Tracks* there are only two narrators. *The Beet Queen* has been one of Erdrich's most commercially successful books, remaining on *The New York Times* best-seller list for four months. Erdrich's short stories have been anthologized in several awards series, including the Pushcart Prize collection of 1983, the O. Henry collections of 1985 and 1987, and *Best American Short Stories* of 1984 and 1988.

While still a young writer, Erdrich received enormous praise and notice. Her work is harshly realistic in its depiction of the difficult lives of Native Americans in the twentieth century, but it is also profoundly moving in its belief in the healing powers of love and connection, in the dignity of human effort."

Jane Hill
Cyclopedia of World Authors II, Vol. 2
ed. Frank N. Magill
(Salem 1989) 504-05

"Karen Louise Erdrich...served for a time as editor of *The Circle*, a newspaper published by the Boston Indian Council, before earning residential fellowships to the distinguished writers' colonies. Her initial reputation was founded on a series of successful short stories, for which she received the Nelson Algren Award in 1982 and a Pushcart Prize in 1983. In 1984 Erdrich published her first, and to date only, book of poetry, *Jacklight*, which focuses upon both her own personal experiences and her observations of small town, upper-midwestern life. The classic themes of this poetry—the fragility and power of a life in the flesh, the desperation of longing, the need for transcendence—she rendered an urgent and vivid organicism with a crackling, electrical imagery. The intensity of the volume is heightened by Erdrich's decision to constrain the energy of many of the poems in classic poetic meters. Indeed, the virtuosity of Erdrich's acclaimed prose style is founded in the disciplined craft of her poetry, most of it written before her more widely known fiction."

Andrew O. Wiget
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D. C. Heath 1990) 2180

"Louise Erdrich burst onto the literary scene in 1984 with *Jacklight*, a highly praised collection of poetry, and a novel, *Love Medicine*, for which she won the National Book Critics Circle Award. In these works and in successive collections of poetry and fiction, she situates the reader in the center of 'family stuff' without an introduction, no auntie to introduce the reader to the world of her interrelated Ojibwe families on and around an imaginary North Dakota reservation. Instead, the reader experiences long and entangled personal histories acted out, for better or worse, as if the reader were suddenly in the middle of the action....

It is this immediacy as well as the notable absence of one central protagonist or overriding point of view in any of Erdrich's works that distinguishes her from her two prominent predecessors, N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko....Both Momaday and Silko utilized a central character, specifically a male on a journey who guided the reader through the character's world, albeit not always easily. Still, the reader had a unifying point of view and, ultimately, a conclusion regarding events and characters in those worlds. Erdrich's central character, or protagonist, if we can call it that, is the community, where, again, none of the

conflicting narrative voices and associated points of view is privileged one over the other. Some critics call this a tribal point of view....

All character formation leads readers to the discourse about important cultural issues. Once the readers move down that path, they are pulled into a web of discourse about culturally moral subjects at the bedrock of meaning creation. Old Nanapush in *Tracks* explains that the stories of people pull listeners and tellers into that web of narrative because...‘once I start there is no end to telling’.”

Greg Sarris
Preface

Approaches to Teaching the Works of Louise Erdrich
eds. Greg Sarris, Connie A. Jacobs, and James R. Giles
(MLA 2004) 1-2

“In her poetry and fiction Louise Erdrich has created an enduring voice of survival and resistance that is based on her Ojibwe tribal identity experiences....[Some critics] presume a destructive notion of ‘assimilate or perish’ and do not reflect modern Native views....As tribal peoples, we need to tell our own stories and develop critical processes that will help readers engage with Native literature while respecting tribal-specific cultures....Native peoples share a history of significant, deliberate loss of culture and language through federally sponsored initiatives such as the reservation system, boarding schools, and relocation. Consequently, this characteristic of survivance is extensive to Native literatures but often ignored by non-Native readers who are unaware of the complexities of overcoming what Erdrich called ‘Cultural annihilation’....

Students have difficulty comprehending the extended family relationships and circular time elements in Erdrich’s writing. They lack an awareness of an Ojibwe point of view as opposed to a Taos Pueblo or Dakota or German point of view....Non-Native scholars are usually driven by theoretical or disciplinary issues that abstract segments of Indian history or culture for analysis, and often do not reflect the study of a culture as a holistic entity’....

While her work may be linked with that of other writers of loss—for example, Jewish or African American authors—Erdrich’s stories are about indigenous survival. She explains, ‘Contemporary Native American writers have therefore a task quite different from that of other writers’....‘In the light of enormous loss, they must tell the stories of contemporary survivors while protecting and celebrating the cores of cultures left in the wake of the catastrophe.’ Accordingly, her writing portrays differing points of view about Ojibwe culture, from very traditional to very disconnected experiences, each one a valid representation of Ojibwe life. The culture and characters portrayed in Erdrich’s poetry and fiction represent a range of contemporary Ojibwe people, their environment, and conditions....

The survivors in her writing—runaway boarding school children forced to wear green dresses ‘the color you would think shame was,’ some characters who are displaced and alone like June Morrissey—endure by being brought back to the geography that informs their tribal identity. Erdrich explains, ‘In a tribal view of the world, where one place has been inhabited for generations, the landscape becomes enlivened by a sense of group and family history.’ That connection to the land is preeminent in Erdrich’s writing and in all Native writing. Erdrich herself represents diversity, as varied influences interact with her Turtle Mountain Ojibwe heritage. The poetry of *Baptism of Desire* depicts how Erdrich syncretized elements of Catholic faith and German tradition with Ojibwe culture....Early Ojibwe encounters with Jesuits illuminate the influence of Catholicism....*The Crown of Columbus*, written with Michael Dorris, intertwines the atmosphere of the academy with Native experience, and *The Blue Jay’s Dance* portrays a writer’s world and mothering feminism.”

Gwen Griffin and P. Jane Hafen
“An Indigenous Approach to Teaching Erdrich’s Works”
Approaches, 95-100

“In these novels, family is character....First, the Native perspective [is] that individual character does not exist in isolation but is part of familial and communal systems and, second, Erdrich’s....Native people are not doomed, as mainstream stereotypes might suggest, but have the power to rewrite inherited

stories...One of the most powerful and persistent family inheritances depicted in these three novels...is the Pillager heritage.

Pillager family traits—their shamanic powers; their wolf grin; their fierce passion; and their trickster-like qualities, especially their skill at gambling and their ability to escape seemingly hopeless situations—are passed through multiple generations, from *Four Souls* to *Old Man Pillager* to *Fleur*, then to *Fleur's* daughter, Lulu Naanpush, on down to Lulu's son Gerry Nanapush and grandson Lipsha Morrissey. When we meet Lulu in the *Love Medicine* story 'The Island,' she tells us that as she matures, she becomes more like her mother—'a Pillager kind of woman with a sudden body, fierce outright wishes, a surprising heart.' The brief sketch of Fleur in that novel does in fact show her to be, like Lulu, strong, fiercely independent, unmoved by what people think of her.

But a fuller portrait of Fleur appears in *Tracks*, which depicts her not only as passionate and independent, capable of any extreme to save her land, but also as the inheritor from her Pillager ancestors of other family traits—an extraordinary power for healing and destruction; a special relationship with the lake manitou, Misshepeshu; and a cunning skill at gambling. The most remarkable of Fleur's powers is her ability to survive her own death, especially death by drowning."

Gay Barton
"Family as Character in Erdrich's Novels"
Approaches, 77-78

"In a 1990 interview with Bill Moyers, Erdrich speaks of seeing herself and Michael Dorris as a 'citizen of two nations'...As such a citizen, Erdrich is positioned to move fluidly between the two nations and to help subtly enhance the one that has been 'left in the wake of catastrophe.' She strives to celebrate her Native heritage and to protect it, while creating engaging narratives that illuminate and challenge members of both nations....Dorris remarks how he and Erdrich always try to give readers a choice in the interpretation of the actions of a character, a choice between a mystical reason and a psychological one. Such dual, mediational characters, who are not rigid or locked into one symbolic meaning but open to a variety of interpretations, eventually lead readers to larger questions about values, assumptions, worldview, and identity....

The characters seem to be talking about many things at once. There is almost a magic realist element to them that distances readers from personal identification while directing them to larger cultural concerns.... Erdrich is not interested in realist representation. Her characters are intended to lead us to...discourses about values....that affect members of both nations, but affect them differently. The character constructs are intended to mediate among different epistemological frameworks with the goal of using them to illuminate and enrich one another. To do this, the constructed identities of characters must lead to the important cultural discourses in both nations."

James Ruppert
"Identity Indexes in *Love Medicine* and 'Jacklight'"
Approaches, 170

"Whether or not Louise Erdrich modeled the character of Fleur on Manido'gieigo'kwe, the similarities between this most vibrant of Erdrich's characters and a dynamic, powerful, historical Ojibwe woman provide a rich opportunity to understand more fully Erdrich's work."

Amelia V. Katanski
"Tracking Fleur: The Ojibwe Roots of Erdrich's Novels"
Approaches, 66

Michael Hollister (2015)