

INTRODUCTION



Louise Erdrich

(1954-)

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 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, on July 6, 1954, 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 Lazarre, 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.

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