

ANALYSIS

The Beet Queen (1986)

Louise Erdrich

(1954-)

“Louise Erdrich...crossed the line from ‘realism’ to ‘magicalism.’ In Erdrich’s *The Beet Queen* (1986), for example, there are several scenes in which magical moments occur, and they seem integrated into the narrative form that is itself fragmented among several voices. The...effect allows individual voices to emerge, not as something ‘actual,’ but as voices that come from inner areas that may or may not be objectively validated. As in some deconstructed artifact, Erdrich keeps moving the center of her novel; and this functions to open the magical option. Early on, there is a crossover between realism and magical moments when the child Mary, new to Argus, North Dakota, and to her school—and, therefore, disoriented—slides into an ice formation which then takes on the image of Jesus, although to Mary it appears to take on the image of her brother Karl.

Such magical or hallucinatory moments energize the novel, which flags somewhat in the middle sections once the young people achieve adulthood and live out their years ordinarily. What does count, however, is how Erdrich has infused a family novel—and we should emphasize that Latino and Native Americans are engaged often, in the family novel that the serious Anglo novel finds problematic—with sparkling moments when nothing seems real, when strange forces appear to be permeating the atmosphere, when growing up is itself a form of magical imposition of elements from both within and without. There are sparks. And even when for the readers such ‘sparks’ do not always resonate, there is enormous energy here, when instability might be the expectation....

Erdrich creates a group that hardly fits the nuclear notion of familial arrangements. It is, like so many others in this genre, extended, and extended into somewhat bizarre linkages. The various voices belong to Mary Adare, the chief survivor; Sita Kozka, her cousin, daughter of Mary’s aunt with whom she goes to live when her mother abandons her; Karl, Mary’s bisexual brother, who marries Mary’s friend Celestine James and has a child with her; Wallace Pfef, with whom Karl has sex now and then, a big man in the world of Argus, North Dakota; and Dot, the child of Celestine and Karl.

The final voice is that of Dot, mixed Indian blood from her heritage, also ‘mixed’ in another sense as daughter of the bisexual Karl. Dot is wild, grungy, a hoodlum, seemingly a lost girl, full of anger and hostility, aware of slights, and yet alive and energized—part of that ‘other’ or ‘beyond’ element in an Erdrich novel even when relationships are tentative and hateful. Dot becomes the beet queen, but only because her father’s sometimes sexual partner, Wallace, fixes the vote. Dot rages, but somehow becomes human in her rage; just as Mary and Sita, her cousin, have raged with each other, come close in fact to murder, and yet have bonded. The range of emotional life is extended in some Lawrentian sense, from the usual and expected into areas where murder, suicide, and other forms of violence are never distant; and yet such emotional extremes, which nourish the magicalism of the novel, lead to a certain human blend.”

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions: 1980-2000
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“A discussion of *The Beet Queen* seems incomplete without mentioning the well-known review in which Leslie Marmon Silko accuses Erdrich of minimizing racial issues and selling out to white American culture (‘Odd Artifact’). Silko has repeated this accusation on subsequent occasions. Responses to Silko have unduly preoccupied criticism of *The Beet Queen*, and the controversy may be one reason many teachers hesitate to teach it. Committed to ‘teaching the conflicts’ (Graff), I juxtapose Silko’s attack with a review by Angela Carter, the British postcolonial feminist writer, who praises *The Beet Queen* for impart[ing] its freshness of vision like an electric shock.’ Observing that Erdrich writes from the triply

marginalized position of a woman, an ethnic minority, and a progeny of the farm belt, Carter argues that Erdrich 'is part of a wedge being driven deep into WASP fiction from new contenders for their share of the Great Tradition.' Citing examples of Erdrich's 'exquisitely precise' social history, Carter contends that Erdrich is 'thoroughly in time with the surreal poetry of America.' Whereas Silko is disgusted by the 'rarified' places and the uncertain racial identities of characters in *The Beet Queen*, Carter reads Erdrich's landscape as richly imaginative and her characters as 'variously cracked, and crazed, and barking mad: but never, for all the elements of the fantastic, less than true to life.'

Kari J. Winter

"Gender as a Drag in *The Beet Queen*"

Approaches to Teaching the Works of Louise Erdrich

eds. Greg Sarris, Connie A. Jacobs, and James R. Giles

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Michael Hollister (2015)