

Louise Erdrich



Native American Writer Karen Louise Erdrich was born in 1954 in Little Falls, Minnesota, the eldest of seven children of Ralph Louis and Rita Joanne Gourneau Erdrich. Her father was of Germanic descent, her mother of Chippewa and French descent. Three-eighths Chippewa, Erdrich is related through her mother to Kaishpau Gourneau, who was tribal chairman of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa in 1882, and she is an enrolled member of that band in the reservation town of Belcourt, North Dakota. Although she has never lived on the reservation, she has visited it often with her family. Both of her parents worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs at a boarding school in Wahpeton, North Dakota, where she spent most of her youth. Her parents encouraged her writing: her father paid her a nickel for each story she wrote, and her mother gathered the stories together and sewed them into little books.

Most of Louise Erdrich's characters and themes grow out of her background as a Native American woman who grew up off the reservation, but her writing is accessible to any reader willing to put forth a bit of effort. Like life itself, her writing sometimes appears disjointed, but she raises virtually all of the issues important to an understanding of the human condition: accidents of birth and parentage, falling in love, generosity, greed, psychological damage, joy, alienation, vulnerability, differentness, parenting, aging, and dying.

After being educated in various schools in Wahpeton, in 1972 Erdrich enrolled at Dartmouth College as a member of the first class of women admitted into the previously all-male institution. She arrived the same day as Michael Dorris, a mixed-blood of Modoc descent who was nine years her senior and a new professor of anthropology; their romantic interest in each other would not begin until some years later. In a 1988 interview Erdrich told Kay Bonetti that she began writing seriously when "I was in college and had failed at everything else. I kept journals and diaries when I was a kid, and I started writing when I was nineteen or twenty. After college I decided that that's absolutely what I wanted to do. Part of it was that I did not prepare myself for anything else in life." At Dartmouth, Erdrich won the Cox Prize in fiction, as well as a prize from the American Academy of Poets. While in college and immediately after receiving her B.A. in English in 1976, she worked at a variety of jobs: hoeing sugar beets, picking cucumbers, selling popcorn at a movie theater, babysitting, lifeguarding, selling fried chicken and pastries, waitressing, short-order cooking, shelving books in a library, weighing dump trucks, writing

advertising copy, and developing photographs. In 1976 she returned to North Dakota to conduct poetry workshops through the Poetry in the Schools program sponsored by the North Dakota Arts Council. In 1978 she entered Johns Hopkins University's creative writing program, directed by Richard Howard. Her 1979 master's thesis was a collection of poems titled "The Common Mercies and Run of Hearts." She then went to Boston and edited the Boston Indian Council newspaper, the *Circle*.

Erdrich received fellowships in 1980 to the MacDowell Colony and in 1981 to the Yaddo Colony. In 1981 she was named writer-in-residence at Dartmouth and became involved with Dorris, who by then had become the founding director of the college's Native American studies program. When they married on 10 October 1981, Erdrich became the adoptive mother of the three Native American children Dorris had earlier adopted as a single parent: Reynold Abel, Jeffrey Sava, and Madeline Hannah. Together they have had three more children: Persia Andromeda, Pallas Antigone, and Aza Marion. Abel, a victim of fetal alcohol syndrome, was to become the subject of Dorris's *The Broken Cord* (1989), for which Erdrich wrote a moving foreword in which she admits that "I drank hard in my twenties, and eventually got hepatitis. I was lucky." She refers to this period again in "Skunk Dreams," first published in the *Georgia Review* in 1993 and collected in *The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birth Year* in 1995, where she refers to "spells of too much cabernet and a few idiotic years of rolling my own cigarettes out of Virginia Blond tobacco."

Erdrich and Dorris say that most of their writing is collaborative, though they usually publish a particular piece under the name of the one who writes the first draft. Although she published a children's writing textbook, *Imagination*, in 1981, Erdrich's literary book-length publications began in 1984 with a collection of poems, *Jacklight*. The jacklight of the title poem is the bright light that hunters use illegally to draw deer from the forest; it becomes a metaphor for the destructive lure of European American culture, with its money, alcohol, cars, religion, and offer of military heroism.

One set of poems in *Jacklight* concerns the legendary Indian trickster Potchikoo, who is born of the sun, marries a cigar-store Indian, and emits flatulence in church. More memorable is the set of fifteen connected narrative poems titled "The Butcher's Wife." Mary Kröger marries the butcher, Otto, after his first wife -- who is also Mary's best friend -- dies, asking her to take care of Otto and their four sons. Many of the poems in "The Butcher's Wife" are about Mary's relationships with the people she "inherits" from her friend: Otto, the sons, Otto's proud sister Hilda, the scavenging woman known as Step-and-a-Half Waleski, the priest. After Otto dies she has to deal with the dog who loved him and with Rudy J. V. Jacklitch, whose courting she does not encourage and for whose suicide she feels responsible. In a 1985 interview with Jan George, Erdrich said that her grandmother's life "vaguely resembles the life lived by Mary Kröger." An intense exploration of the interconnected lives of a family, "The Butcher's Wife" is a preview of a major theme of Erdrich's fiction.

The final poem of *Jacklight*, "Turtle Mountain Reservation," dedicated to Pat Gourneau, her grandfather, is a collection of reservation images and people: the heron, the owl, drunken Uncle Ray, Theresa, and, most of all, the senile Grandpa, "crazy / as the loon that calls its children /

across the lake." Grandpa's hands are twisted and useless, but they are her hands as well: "Hands of earth, of this clay / I'm also made from."

In a 1990 interview with Laura Coltelli, Erdrich said that she soon found poetry too confining: "I just began to realize that I wanted to be a fiction writer; that's a bigger medium, you know. I have a lot more room and it's closer to the oral tradition of sitting around and telling stories." She published some short stories in collaboration with her sister, Heidi Erdrich, under the name Heidi Louise and with her husband under the name Milou North; then she and Dorris, seeing a notice about the Nelson Algren Award for stories of five thousand words, worked for two weeks to put together the "The World's Greatest Fishermen." It won the \$5,000 Algren Award for 1982. The next year Erdrich received a Pushcart Prize for one of her poems and a National Magazine Fiction Award for "Scales," which was included in *The Best American Short Stories 1983*. With the help and advice of her husband she revised "The World's Greatest Fishermen" as the lead story in the novel *Love Medicine* (1984).

In her introduction to *The Best American Short Stories 1993* Erdrich writes that "the best short stories contain novels." *Love Medicine* is a series of fine short stories revised and augmented into a fine novel; the stories are not so much chapters in a novel as they are a complex entangling of families, histories, and themes into a richly diverse narrative. *Love Medicine* bears comparison with Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses and Other Stories* (1942) as a bringing together of stories that work individually but are enriched when read in the context provided by the other stories. By setting her most important work on and around a North Dakota Indian reservation and by depicting its German-French-Irish-Scandinavian-Mexican-Chippewa-Cree-Catholic characters through several generations, Erdrich has created her own Winesburg and her own Yoknapatawpha County.

The first novel in what may be called her North Dakota Saga, *Love Medicine* is about the members of five families of Indians and mixed-bloods -- the Nanapushes, the Kashpaws, the Pillagers, the Lazarres, and the Morrisseys -- that are bound by ties of blood, love, jealousy, hate, religion, death, history, and politics. The novel begins in 1981 when June Morrissey Kashpaw, after being picked up in a bar and seduced in a pickup truck by a drunken white engineer, walks off toward her home on the reservation but freezes to death on the way. Some of the other characters see her death as having been caused by an exploitative white society; some are jealous of her beauty and differentness; some are fascinated by her life story; some miss their lost mother, aunt, or lover; some appear to be interested only in the new car her son buys with her life insurance benefit. Above all, however, there is love for June. The ripples of love that her death sets in motion serve as a kind of medicine for the others.

Love Medicine introduces many of the concerns Erdrich would explore in her later works, one of which is the question of parentage. Albertine Johnson never knew her white father. Since Lipsha Morrissey does not know that June was his mother, he knows neither that King Kashpaw is his half-brother nor that Gerry Nanapush is his father. Lulu Lamartine has so many lovers that it is difficult to know who fathered which of her children: is Henry Lamartine Jr. really Henry's son or the son of Henry's brother Beverly? Marie Kashpaw thinks that her parents are Ignatius Lazarre and an alcoholic woman, but her real mother turns out to be a nun. Although the novel climaxes with Lipsha's discovery of his real parents, in the context of the larger family

relationships that make up *Love Medicine*, biological parentage matters far less than love parentage. What concerns Lipsha most is not that his biological mother, June, tied him into a weighted potato sack when he was a baby and threw him into the lake but that his "real" mother is Marie, who took him in as she had earlier taken in June. What matters to him is that he gets along far better with Albertine, who is not really his blood cousin, than he does with King, who is really his half-brother. Blood relationships are sometimes far more full of hate and pain than of joy. June, one of Marie's favorite "take-ins," was really the daughter of her sister and was later educated in the ways of the wild by Eli Kashpaw, Marie's brother-in-law. The woman who turns out to be Marie's "real mother" either ignores her or seems bent on destroying her.

Another theme in *Love Medicine* is the role of alcohol in Indian families. One of Marie's chief functions as a wife has been to try to keep Nector Kashpaw away from drink. Henry Lamartine dies drunk when he drives his car along the railroad tracks. June is drunk when she sets off across the plains to her death after being seduced by the drunken engineer. At the family gathering some months later, June's son King's love, guilt, and anger are accentuated by his being drunk. Albertine, June's niece, is almost as drunk as Henry Jr. when, at age fifteen, she loses her virginity to him. After June's death Albertine drinks beer and wine to numb the pain of memory and of family frictions. And Gordie Kashpaw is drunk when he confuses the dead June with a car-struck deer. Alcohol is not far from most of the significant actions of the novel, and it serves as a kind of jacklight, luring the characters into danger and sometimes to destruction.

In her 1985 essay "Where I Ought To Be" Erdrich emphasizes the importance of place in her writing:

I grew up in a small North Dakota town, on land that once belonged to the Wahpeton-Sisseton Sioux but had long since been leased out and sold to non-Indian farmers. Our family of nine lived on the very edge of town in a house that belonged to the Government and was rented to employees of the Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school, where both my parents worked, and where my grandfather, a Turtle Mountain Chippewa named Pat Gourneau, had been educated.... I often see this edge of town -- the sky and its towering and shifting formations of clouds, that beautifully lighted emptiness -- when I am writing.

It is apparent that much of the setting for *Love Medicine* comes from Erdrich's memories of her early life near this Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school, as well as from her memories of frequent visits to the Turtle Mountain reservation in northern North Dakota, just below the Canadian border. The existence of most of her characters is controlled by the fact that they are Indians surrounded by a white culture. Issues of race and ethnicity, though in some ways they dominate *Love Medicine*, are finally rather insignificant: the novel is about being human, not about being Indian. Nor is *Love Medicine* an antiwhite novel. There are some subtle jabs at the federal government's policies of allotment and termination on Indian reservations; June's seducer is a white man; and Gerry is thrown in jail the first time for kicking a white cowboy in the crotch during a barroom argument about whether Indians are "niggers." But racial prejudice runs both ways. The mostly white Albertine is thought inferior by some Indians who are more pure-blooded than she, and most of the Indians in the novel seem united in their dislike of the mostly white, no-good Morrisseys and the mostly white, dirty Lazarres. Still, in *Love Medicine* one's quantum of Indian blood matters less than one's quantum of love.

That love takes on grotesque dimensions at times. Sister Leopolda -- possibly angry that Marie is living proof of her own nonvirginity -- shows her motherly hate/love for Marie by attacking her with a bread poker and pouring boiling water on her. Nector poses in a diaper for a white artist who wants to show her love of Indians by painting one jumping naked off a cliff. Fat Dot Adare is impregnated by fat Gerry Nanapush while sitting astride him with a hole ripped in her pantyhose in the visiting room of a prison. Lulu picks for her husband the brother who, standing naked before her after a game of strip poker, has the better erection. Nector and Lulu make love smeared in butter and, later, in the laundry room of the senior citizens' center. Nector chokes on a turkey heart that has been blessed by Lipsha and is supposed to be a "love medicine."

In an interview with Joseph Bruchac shortly after the publication of *Love Medicine* (collected in *Conversations with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris*, 1994), Erdrich said that the writer's conscious role in writing is almost passive:

I really don't control the subject matter, it just takes me. I believe that a poet or a fiction writer is something like a medium at a seance who lets the voices speak. Of course, a person has to study and develop technical expertise. But a writer can't control subject and background. If he or she is true to what's happening, the story will take over.

She even uses the passive voice in speaking about writing: "Maybe I'm just crazy. But I sit down and, if something is there, it will be written."

Erdrich's *The Beet Queen* (1986) is the story of the life of Dot Adare, whose between-prisons affair with Gerry Nanapush provides a measure of humor in *Love Medicine*. The main setting of *The Beet Queen* is the little town of Argus, a few miles south of the reservation, but it moves to the reservation, to Fargo, and to Minneapolis. In this second novel in her North Dakota Saga, Erdrich introduces a white family, the Adares, who are just as fragmented as many of the Indian families in the earlier novel. The fragmentation begins with the death of the white businessman who, though he has another family, keeps Adelaide Adare as his mistress and fathers her three children. His death at the beginning of the Great Depression leaves Adelaide so desperate that she abandons her three children and impulsively flies away with a stunt pilot, never to return. Her daughter Mary goes to Argus to be raised by her Aunt and Uncle Kozka. Adelaide's son Karl, after having been rescued by the Indian peddler Fleur Pillager, winds up in an orphanage in Minnesota. The newborn baby is kidnapped by another family and raised as Jude Miller. On its most literal level, *The Beet Queen* is the story of how these three children are brought back together -- physically, if not emotionally -- forty years later, when Karl's daughter, Dot, repeats the family history by flying off with another stunt pilot.

Many of the chapters in this novel, like those in *Love Medicine*, had been published first as short stories. The effect of *The Beet Queen*, however, is far more focused. It covers only forty years instead of the seventy of *Love Medicine*, and it keeps the reader's attention on a single family rather than dividing it among five families, as the earlier novel did. It shares with *Love Medicine*, however, the theme of the search for one's parents. The counterpart of Lipsha in this novel is Jude Miller, the infant abandoned by his mother and raised by someone else. By becoming a priest Jude delivers a different kind of love medicine on his stumbling, reluctant, and abortive path toward discovery.

The Beet Queen is not a novel about Indians, but Indians play roles in it. Eli is caretaker to his ailing half-brother, Russell Kashpaw. The novel introduces Fleur Pillager, who will play a larger role in Erdrich's next novel, *Tracks* (1988). The part-Indian heritage of Celestine James, Dot's mother, makes Dot at least one quarter Indian. Again, however, blood quantum is not nearly as important as love quantum. Most of the strange characters in *The Beet Queen* are incapable of love: men use women; mothers abandon or kidnap children; fathers abandon daughters; sons abandon sisters; and daughters reject mothers. Dot, however, grows in the final chapter to feel something like love for her mother, Celestine: "In her eyes I see the force of her love. It is bulky and hard to carry like a package that keeps untying.... I walk to her, drawn by her, unable to help myself."

If Dot is uncomfortable showing love, the circumstances of her engendering and upbringing help to explain why. Her father, Karl, is an effeminate homosexual who has come reluctantly to Argus to establish contact with his sister and makes love with the masculine Celestine. When Celestine becomes pregnant she marries him but then immediately banishes him so that she can raise Dot alone. Karl does little more in the way of fatherly duty than buy Dot a breakfast and send her a motorized wheelchair she does not need. In raising Dot, Celestine is aided by Mary Adare, who seems to feel a lesbian attraction to Celestine, and by Wallace Pfef, a homosexual who had had a brief affair with Karl. Wallace helps in the emergency delivery of Dot and then acts as a surrogate father, throwing occasional birthday parties for her and rigging the voting for queen of the sugar beet festival so that Dot wins. At first glance it seems that Mary's cousin Sita is the only person who displays normal love; but she is a pretentious and anorexic model whose two marriages were based more on need than on love and whose addiction to painkillers eventually leads to her suicide. In such surroundings, it is not surprising that Dot seems immune to love.

There are grotesque incidents in *The Beet Queen*. After each of his homosexual encounters -- one with a railroad bum, Giles Saint Ambrose, the other with Wallace Pfef -- Karl Adare leaps from high places, nearly to his death. Mary slides face-first down the school sliding board in midwinter; when her face cracks a sheet of ice at the bottom in such a way that it seems to resemble the face of Christ, she is hailed as the bringer of a "manifestation." Sita's death, far from being tragic, is almost comic: Mary and Celestine find her body in her yard, sitting against a yew bush. Too busy to call an undertaker, they take her with them, propped up in the middle of the pickup seat, to the beet festival. A policeman who stops them for speeding says a few words to the corpse, never realizing that it is dead. Later Karl gets into the pickup, talks to Sita, and takes a nap -- also never realizing that she is dead.

The Beet Queen has not earned the critical praise that *Love Medicine* did, perhaps because Erdrich's readers want Native American writers to write about Native American characters and subjects. It may also be that Erdrich's narrative voice loses some of its vigor when she begins to step away from an Indian milieu. Leslie Marmon Silko, a Native American writer, began what some scholars call "the Silko-Erdrich controversy" by criticizing Erdrich's novel for not being more revealing of the racism of North Dakota society. She calls particular attention to Russell Kashpaw, the wounded veteran:

Erdrich regained her voice and her audience in 1988 with her third novel, *Tracks*. It is one of her most powerful works and the favorite of many of her readers. It is not as choppy and disjointed as *Love Medicine*; it focuses more narrowly on Indian characters and themes than *The Beet Queen*; and it is more overtly political than its predecessors. Its main events precede those of the earlier novels. Readers who want to know how Sister Leopolda came to be a nun will find out here that Leopolda is half-crazy, that she is several times over a near-murderer, and that she had become a reluctant mother before becoming an eager bride of Christ. It is revealed that the brothers Eli and Nector are so different because they are not twins after all but nearly a decade apart in age and the product of quite different educational environments: Eli was raised by Nanapush to know the land, while the younger Nector was raised by Margaret Kashpaw to know white ways. While in *Love Medicine* Eli seems to have had no women in his life, in *Tracks* one learns that he had fallen in love early in his life with the wild Fleur, apparently the only romantic attachment he ever had. Fleur, the peddler who rescues Karl in *The Beet Queen*, is shown to have had supernatural, almost witchlike powers as a young woman. Lulu and Marie are rivals for Nector in *Love Medicine*; here it is revealed that Lulu was born of the union of Fleur with one of four possible fathers, while Marie is the child of the partly deranged Pauline Puyat, who later becomes Sister Leopolda, and the drunk Napoleon Morrissey.

In the 1988 interview with Bonetti, Dorris mentions that a draft of *Tracks* was in existence at the time that he and Erdrich were trying to get a publisher for *Love Medicine*. By the time it appeared as a novel many of its chapters had been published as separate stories. Even so, the chapters fit together more seamlessly than do those of the earlier novels. Not only is the dozen-year time span of the novel more narrow, but with only two narrators, both speaking in the first person, *Tracks* feels far more circumscribed and controlled than either *Love Medicine* or *The Beet Queen*. There is still a confusingly rich array of characters, but the focus is more clearly on only a few of them: Nanapush and his lover Margaret, Fleur Pillager and her lover Eli Kashpaw, and Pauline, or Sister Leopolda.

Tracks is at once both Erdrich's most humorous novel and her most political one. The humor comes primarily in Nanapush's comic exchanges about sex with Margaret and in his genial criticism of Pauline. Vowing to urinate only at dawn and at dusk, Pauline is tricked by Nanapush into a midafternoon release -- much to her consternation and his amusement. Nanapush's humor serves generally to place Pauline's strange behavior into a friendly, rather than an antagonistic, frame. She is deranged, of course: in addition to her peculiar urinary habits, she mortifies her flesh by putting her shoes on the wrong feet, starving herself almost to death, and refusing to bathe or change her clothes. And yet, in part because of Nanapush's loving humor, the reader sees her as solidly human rather than as merely weird. Even though she is probably a murderer, Nanapush helps the reader to love rather than condemn her.

The condemnation in this novel is reserved for the white political forces that destroyed the forests and altered families and a tribe almost beyond recognition, but Indians are also held responsible. The real villains are young Nector and his mother, Margaret, who violate Fleur's trust by using her money to pay the taxes on their own Kashpaw land. Even so, Erdrich seems not to want her readers to hate any of these people but rather to share with Nanapush a sense of sadness that the tribe has been changed forever into "a tribe of file cabinets and triplicates, a tribe

of single-space documents, directives, policy. A tribe of pressed trees. A tribe of chicken-scratch that can be scattered by a wind, diminished to ashes by one struck match."

One of Erdrich's most impressive attributes as a novelist is her experimentation with narrative point of view: each of the narrators in her novels speaks with authentic individuality. Erdrich's skill with point of view is especially impressive in *Tracks*. Nanapush is a generally truthful narrator; he is motivated to tell Lulu the story of those early days by his desire to convince her that she should not hate her mother, Fleur, for abandoning her, and by his desire that she not marry the Morrissey man she thinks she loves. Pauline's motives for telling her story and the story of Fleur are not so clear, but it seems that, in her half-crazed and fanatical way, she wants to justify her own violent and probably murderous actions. If Nanapush seems intent on telling the truth, Pauline seems intent on concealing it -- or, at least, concealing the full truth about her part in the events. Both narrators focus so effectively, and so differently, on Fleur that the reader comes to know the wild young woman deeply. Nanapush loves Fleur, and Pauline is jealous of her; together they reveal Fleur to the reader more clearly than she could have revealed herself if she had been the speaker. The indomitable Fleur can be buffeted by nature but can control the wind. She can be beaten but never defeated. She can drown but survive again and again. She sounds like a spirit, but the reader knows her as human and can understand why she attracts not only men but also the lake creature who lives in Matchimanito. The reader never enters Fleur's mind directly, and she says little. But the reader knows her and comes to love her through Erdrich's skillful narrative indirection.

Baptism of Desire (1989), Erdrich's second book of poetry, returns to some of the themes and personages of *Jacklight*; Mary Kröger and the delightful Potchikoo are present, for example. But the poems in *Baptism of Desire* will have special appeal for Roman Catholics. The poems are not pious, at least not in the usual sense. Saint Clare, for example, is referred to as the "patron saint of television," while Christ's twin was "formed of chicken blood and lightning." The poem "Mary Magdalene" ends with Mary driving boys to "smash empty bottles on their brow": "It is the old way that girls get even with their fathers -- / by wrecking their bodies on other men." Many of the poems in *Baptism of Desire* were written, according to a note, "between the hours of two and four in the morning, a period of insomnia brought on by pregnancy," and several of them refer to pregnancy, birth, growth, and loneliness.

The Virgilian "Potchikoo's after Life" takes the trickster-hero's soul to the Pearly Gates. Saint Peter sends him on to the Indian heaven, in which Potchikoo is rather disappointed: it is just a place where the chokecherries give him diarrhea and the people sit around and eat venison that is not as tasty as his wife's had been. He returns home, stopping off to see the white people's hell -- a warehouse where souls drag around old Sears Roebuck catalogues. More realistic is "Poor Clare," in which the title character defies her mother by sneaking out at night to go to the carnival. She earns money for the ferris wheel by giving sex in the bushes: "She wasn't bad, just dull, and much too eager / for a man's touch as she had no father." Nine months later she kills her baby, who dies without benefit of baptism -- of desire or any other kind.

The year 1991 brought the publication of two fully collaborative books, in which both Erdrich's and Dorris's names appear on the title page. *Route Two* is a reminiscence of the Dorris-Erdrich family trip along route 2 through Minnesota, North Dakota, and Montana to visit relatives. It is

of interest for its descriptions of landscape, its language, and the glimpses it affords of family life. *The Crown of Columbus*, a novel published to capitalize on the five-hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in America, relates the unlikely adventures of two Dartmouth professors who fall in love: Vivian Twostar, a part-Navajo assistant professor of anthropology who hopes to get tenure, and Roger Williams, an English professor who already has it. She has a "difficult" teenage son, whom he learns to father, and together they have a baby daughter. This unlikely family heads to the Bahamas and encounters movielike adventures that ought to be more hair-raising and more convincing than they are.

Though *The Crown of Columbus* has some of the Erdrichian delight in language and character, reviewers called it a potboiler that is not as good as the best work that the two writers have done individually. After the first spate of reviews, literary scholars generally ignored the book. The narration is reminiscent of that in *Tracks*, with the looser Vivian telling some chapters, the stiffer Roger telling others. There are some surprising moments, as when the lazy Bahamian native Valerie Clock suddenly begins to look at the sea not in terms of her boring job but as an opportunity -- "It was a while before Valerie started to think of the sea as a place to cross, but once she did, she couldn't stop" -- and some funny scenes, but *The Crown of Columbus* rarely overcomes the fundamental unbelievability of its plot. Erdrich can make unlikely internal adventures seem real; this work requires that she do the same for unlikely external adventures involving evil capitalists, attempted murder, and shark-infested waters. The theme of internal psychological discovery, of people finding themselves, is overshadowed by the political theme of the "discovery" of a land that did not need to be discovered. As for the crown itself, readers tended to be either not surprised that it turns out to be a crown of thorns or disappointed that it is, after all the waiting, merely that. In a 1991 interview with Douglas Foster (reprinted in *Conversations with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris*) the authors were asked about their biggest fears in regard to the publication of their new book. Erdrich replied, "My biggest fear is always nasty reviews. I'm a real chicken." Her husband's response was that his "biggest fear is that people will say, 'She ought to write by herself.'" Both of their fears were realized. *The Crown of Columbus* seems to have taught Erdrich that her strongest voice as a writer comes out in a Western reservation setting rather than in an Eastern academic one, and the \$1.5 million advance she and her husband received for it allowed them to give up the Eastern academic establishment and move back to the Minnesota-North Dakota environs that have been so important to her.

After being disappointed in *The Crown of Columbus*, Erdrich's readers were delighted to see her return to her solo voice and her old themes in a revised and enlarged version of *Love Medicine* (1993). Many of the changes are innocuous: Erdrich adds a hyphen to the compound adjective *just-born* at the end of "The Good Tears," changes the name of Lake Turcot to Matchimanito Lake, makes it clear that Old Man Pillager is Moses Pillager, changes Old Lady Blue to Old Lady Pillager in one place and Old Man Pillager to Old Lady Pillager in another, and changes the French word *merde* (shit) to the Indian word *ka-ka*. Some of the changes are more substantial: Gordie now dies, and Eli and Nector are no longer twins but, as in *Tracks*, are nearly a decade apart in age. The most fundamental change is that Marie and Nector do not have sex on their first encounter on the hillside road leading away from the convent; Nector merely touches her with his hand. There are four and a half additional chapters that look back to the events of *Tracks* ("The Island" and part 2 of "The Beads"), resolve issues left unresolved in the original version

("Resurrection"), or prepare the way for Lyman Lamartine's capitalistic shenanigans in Erdrich's next book, the 1994 novel *The Bingo Palace* ("The Tomahawk Factory" and "Lyman's Luck"). In these last chapters Lyman Lamartine changes from the loving and good-hearted friend of Henry Jr.'s that he was in the 1984 version to a much more cynical, political, and calculating person:

One wonders why Erdrich decided to revise and add to a novel that had already been completed and published. In an epistolary interview she gave to Nancy Feyl Chavkin and Allan Chavkin between September 1992 and April 1993 she says that "there is no reason to think of publication as a final process. I think of it as temporary storage." She admits that she hates "the process of finishing anything"; when asked why, she answers, "because I don't want to die, I hate death, and living things keep growing. I hope I live long enough to cultivate a civilized attitude about the end of things, because I'm very immature, now, about letting go of what I love."

Erdrich's concern with death is never far below the surface of her poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. In her 1992 poem "Foxglove" (reprinted in *The Blue Jay's Dance*), for example, she speaks of her resentment of old New England houses because they "have contained many deaths." The following year, in "Skunk Dreams" (also reprinted in *The Blue Jay's Dance*), she says, "I want something of the self on whom I have worked so hard to survive the loss of the body." She comes almost to admire the skunk because its odor makes it nearly immune to danger: "If I were an animal, I'd choose to be a skunk; live fearlessly, eat anything, gestate my young in just two months.... I wouldn't walk so much as putter, destinationless, in a serene belligerence -- past hunters, past death overhead, past death all around."

At one point Erdrich and her husband envisioned the North Dakota Saga as a tetralogy based on the four classical elements. As Dorris put it in their 1988 interview with Bonetti, they had "thought of each of these books as having kind of an element central to its symbolism, *Love Medicine* being water, *Beet Queen* being air, *Tracks* being earth, and the last book being fire, because there are missiles in it." That symbolism has not played itself out in the actual fourth novel in the series, in which there are no missiles or fire (unless a sweat lodge counts as fire). And there is no indication that the fourth novel was ever meant to be the last of the series. *The Bingo Palace* leaves the usual number of loose threads to be picked up in subsequent stories and novels. Even before finishing *The Bingo Palace*, Erdrich spoke to the Chavkins about her next book, *Tales of Burning Love* (1996), "about women and the complexity of their love for one man, for their children, for God, for other women." She also mentioned that she was working on a book to be called "The True Story of Mustache Maude," about "a real person, a North Dakota maverick." It would be based on the early 1984 story of the same title, which was "an experiment in voice and form."

The Bingo Palace picks up where the 1993 version of *Love Medicine* leaves off. Lyman Lamartine's dream of a bingo establishment on the reservation not only comes true but also spawns a new dream of a full-blown casino resort to be built on the banks of Matchimanito Lake. Albertine Johnson is back, this time as a medical student home for a visit. Her mother, Zelda, is trying to control the lives of those around her. Fleur Pillager is an old woman who is about to be displaced once again from her land on the Matchimanito shore. Gerry Nanapush is still escaping from the law. His mother, Lulu Lamartine, is doing what she can to keep the tribe functioning as a unit. Marie is still at genial odds with Lulu. Lipsha Morrissey is playing his biggest role yet as

a love-struck drifter who loses his medical powers when he decides to charge for them. Even June is back, playing a ghostly cameo role.

There is one important new character in *The Bingo Palace*: Shawnee Ray Toose, a lovely young unmarried mother. A major feature of the plot is the love triangle involving Shawnee Ray, Lipsha, and Lyman. Lyman loves Shawnee Ray and may be the father of her child, Redford; but Lyman's nephew, Lipsha, loves her as well, and both men seek to marry her. Zelda also lays claim to Shawnee Ray, or at least to her son, Redford. Shawnee Ray, however, is not much interested in cementing any of these relationships and goes off at the end to the university, Redford in tow, to study design. Lipsha, meanwhile, helps his father, Gerry, to escape the police yet again, this time in a car chase across the snowswept plains northwest of Fargo as they head home to the reservation. Just as *Love Medicine* had begun with June's death by freezing on her way home from an off-reservation town, *The Bingo Palace* ends with her son's apparent death by freezing on his way home from another one.

Readers who remember Erdrich's story "American Horse" (1984), about a boy named Buddy who is stolen away from his mother, Albertine American Horse, will recognize the basic plot, with the names changed, of chapter 15, "Redford's Luck." Some characters in *The Bingo Palace* appear to be taking over roles occupied by other characters in *Love Medicine*. Lyman is the new Nector, an educated, sophisticated, politically astute but unprincipled leader who tramples the rights of others as he pursues his ambitions. Zelda is the new Marie, taking in stray people and trying to manage their lives. Shawnee Ray is the new Lulu, smiting men with her beauty and giving birth to children of whose paternity she cannot be sure.

The Bingo Palace continues the trend in Erdrich's novels toward tighter focus. *Love Medicine* covers seventy years; *The Beet Queen* covers forty years; *Tracks* covers twelve years. The events in *The Bingo Palace*, on the other hand, extend over only a year, from one winter to the next. Though there is still a rich array of characters, the main figure here is, unquestionably, Lipsha. He is central to most of the events of the plot, from the comic vision quest that ends in a female skunk spraying him to the climactic car chase, complete with his enormous stolen stuffed bird. The other characters exist in this novel primarily to provide meaningful interactions with Lipsha. Lipsha struggles to find or define himself in relationship with Gerry, his father; June, his mother; Lyman, his uncle; Marie and Lulu, his grandmothers; and Shawnee Ray, his lover.

Lipsha's struggle to come to terms with June -- the dead woman who had tied him, as a newborn baby, into a cloth sack with some rocks and had thrown him into the lake -- is the central drama of the novel. It gradually becomes clear that though Lipsha thinks he loves Shawnee Ray for her beauty and sexuality, he loves her at least as much for her motherhood:

I see her rocking Redford, kissing him, touching his face with her finger, and it presses a panic jolt. First off, there is no way I can imagine June Morrissey doing that to me, and my thoughts veer away in longing. The subject makes my throat choke up with envy.... I wish I was that little boy, I wish I was Redford.

The novel ends with Lipsha becoming a kind of mother himself. When he and Gerry head for home, they find a baby in the car they steal. When Gerry leaves to join the ghostly June in her ghostly car, Lipsha is left with the baby in a freezing snowstorm. Lipsha wraps the baby warmly

and zips him into his own coat. The outcome of the scene is ambiguous, but it appears that Lipsha may freeze to death, while the baby, unzipped in a grotesque parody of a caesarean birth, lives. Lipsha seems to have been able to give this baby the love and life that his own mother, June, had denied him.

Erdrich's nonfiction has taken the form of short magazine pieces; those pieces, augmented by several previously unpublished ones, appeared in 1995 as *The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birth Year*. Many of the articles -- which include essays, thoughts, reflections, recipes, and assorted snippets -- are built around her thoughts about being pregnant and about raising her three daughters. The title piece is about a blue jay that audaciously faces or "dances" down an attacking hawk and wins its own right to life. *The Blue Jay's Dance* is full of surprises: "Reliable birth control is one of the best things that's happened to contemporary literature"; "Death is the least civilized right of passage"; "It seems unfair that because I am a mammal I am condemned to give birth through the lower part of my body while flowers, though brainless, have the wisdom to shoot straight upward"; "Why is no woman's labor as famous as the death of Socrates?"; "A woman needs to tell her own story, to tell the bloody version of the fairy tale."

Erdrich's most recent novel, *Tales of Burning Love*, is made up of forty-six stories. Some of them are narrated by women telling about their experiences with Jack Mauser, a construction contractor in Fargo, North Dakota. Jack is of somewhat uncertain origin, but his father is of German heritage and Jack is an enrolled member of the Chippewa tribe through his mother, Mary Stamper. Jack is "Andy," the engineer who seduces June Morrissey Kashpaw in the opening sequence of "The World's Greatest Fishermen" in *Love Medicine*. That sequence is retold from Jack's point of view in the opening chapter of *Tales of Burning Love*. He gives June a false name in the bar in Williston because he does not want her to guess that his mother was from the same reservation as June's. The reader learns in this novel that Jack and June had been married in the bar in a quasi-legal "ceremony" performed by a "preacher" who had ordered his divinity degree from a matchbook cover, with beer can pop-tops as wedding rings. The "bride" and "groom" fail in their attempt to consummate their "marriage" before June sets out on her walk to her death.

Apparently ridden with guilt for June's death and frustrated in his burning love for her, Jack subsequently marries, successively, Eleanor Schlick, a college professor; Candice Pantamounty, a dentist; Marlis Cook, a waitress and would-be singer; and Dot Adare Nanapush, an accountant in his construction firm, Mauser and Mauser. When Jack's financial troubles grow too big for him -- partly because Marlis had stolen his huge loan check from the bank -- the intoxicated Jack allows his house to burn down around him, thinking vaguely that his insurance adjustment will help him get back on his feet financially. He almost dies in the fire, and when he escapes he leaves behind evidence that he has, in fact, perished.

Three of his four surviving wives attend his funeral in early January 1995. Later they join the fourth wife in a bar. As they are driving home together a blizzard starts, and they become stranded in a snowbank alongside the road. To keep each other awake, they agree to tell "scorching" true tales about their own lives. The situation of four widows trapped in a car in a blizzard provides the frame for a series of tales, many of them focused on or leading up to each woman's relationship with Jack Mauser.

The blizzard in which the four wives are caught is the same one that nearly entombs Lipsha Morrissey and the baby at the end of *The Bingo Palace*. Lipsha and the baby, who turns out to be Jack's son by his fourth wife, Marlis, survive the blizzard when they are rescued in the nick of time by the snowplow-driving Jack. Gerry Nanapush, who has just escaped from an airplane crash, is behind the back seat of the car in which Jack's four wives are telling their stories. Gerry is the former husband of Jack's fifth wife, Dot, and seems to overhear much of what the women say before he again narrowly escapes capture, this time on a stolen snowmobile. In this last escape he is perhaps aided by the ghost of June, which hovers over many of the chapters in *Tales of Burning Love*. Lyman Lamartine plays a small role as the man who pays off Jack Mauser's debts and offers Jack the job of building the new casino on the reservation.

Tales of Burning Love is Erdrich's least realistic, and at the same time her most optimistic, novel. Contrivances, coincidences, and improbabilities abound, yet the reader willingly suspends disbelief. Would Jack really marry so often and with such foolish haste? Could he be so blind both to his own needs and to the needs of his wives? Could so poor a businessman succeed as well as he seems to have? Would an undertaker hold a funeral for a man if the only evidence of his having been killed in a fire was a partial dental plate? Is it likely that Jack's third and fourth wives would wind up as lesbian parents of his only child? Could Jack survive, almost without a scratch, having a marble statue of the Blessed Virgin dropped on him? The various activities on the night of the blizzard seem more like the shenanigans of a group of comedians than the life-threatening encounters of frail humans with powerful natural forces. Almost all of the stories have happy endings: Candice and Marlis find true love with one another; Dot and Gerry are reconciled and make love once again; Gerry, tricksterlike, escapes yet again; and Eleanor and Jack seem to find true happiness together at last. Jack has grown up to an awareness of his role as a father and a knowledge of what love is all about.

In some ways *Tales of Burning Love* can be considered a feminist novel. Jack Mauser can be regarded as standing for most men in their dealings with women -- insensitive, self-oriented, fickle, inconstant, childish, lust-driven, immature. By the design of her novel, Erdrich keeps the point of view of women in the forefront of her reader's consciousness; the result is that the novel is far less about Jack than it is about the reactions of women to him. Those reactions are often moving, sometimes memorable, sometimes funny, but never really unfair. No one who reads the novel will forget the richly comic scene in which Marlis hog-ties Jack, plucks his eyebrows, and rips the hair off his legs, then glues high-heeled shoes onto his feet. She wants him to know firsthand some of the pain women endure to attract the likes of him and keep them happy.

In 1996 Erdrich published, in addition to the 452-page *Tales of Burning Love*, the 30-page *Grandmother's Pigeon*, with lush illustrations by Jim LaMarche. *Grandmother's Pigeon* is an almost-mythical children's story about a grandmother who rides off on a dolphin to Greenland, leaving behind in her room eggs that later hatch into homing pigeons of an extinct species. Her two grandchildren help to raise the pigeons, then tie messages to their legs and release them. Later they get a letter from their grandmother in Greenland, thanking them for the messages.

It would be a mistake to label Erdrich exclusively a woman's writer; she speaks with deep understanding about what it is to be male, as well. But there can be no doubt that women readers find much to connect with in Erdrich's poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. Whether or not her own

life and personality are reflected in Mary Kröger or Albertine Johnson or Vivian Twostar or Shawnee Ray Toose, Erdrich speaks with an unquestionable authority about what it is to be a woman. In her 1993 essay "A Woman's Work: Too Many Demands and Not Enough Selves" she speaks of the situation of a woman who hopes to pursue a career as well as raise children:

"I'm being swallowed alive. On those days suicide is an idea too persistent for comfort. "There isn't a self to kill," I think, filled with melodramatic pity for who I used to be. That person is gone. Yet once I've established that I have no personal self, killing whatever remains seems hardly worth the effort."

Men and women both can rejoice that Erdrich has found ways, especially through her writing, to rise above such grim feelings.

Asked by the Chavkins why she writes her early drafts longhand, Erdrich replied, with her typical mixture of seriousness and humor, "Longhand feels more personal, as though I'm physically touching the subject. If I get a good idea in a bar I can walk back to Women, Females, Damsels, Does, etc., shut and lock the stall, then jot." Asked if she feels like an outsider, she answered unequivocally, "Sure, always an outsider, but that's a gift for a writer.... People who belong don't become writers, they're immersed and have no edge." Louise Erdrich has the edge.

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