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Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

Louise Erdrich was born in 1954 in Little Falls, Minnesota, eldest of seven children. Her parents were both teachers; they made sure that Louise and her siblings were exposed to classic literature and poetry as well as the oral storytelling traditions of their Chippewa ancestors. Louise's father even paid her small sums for the stories she wrote as a child. Two of Erdrich's sisters also grew up to be writers.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Students should take notes as they listen. Split the students into three groups. Have each group read one of the following Reader's Guide essays: "Introduction to the Novel," "Louise Erdrich (b. 1954)," or "An Interview with Louise Erdrich." Have each group present what they've learned.

As a class, ask students to consider which events in Erdrich's life might have had the greatest impact on her writing. They might also note what factors influenced not just Erdrich, but two of her siblings to also become writers. Finally, ask how growing up in a home in which two very different cultures were blended might have shaped her writing.

Writing Exercise

Louise Erdrich has said that the family tales she heard as a child influenced the way she thinks about storytelling. Students should write a brief essay (three or four paragraphs) about one of the family stories they heard repeatedly as children. Who told the story, and why? Were conflicting versions of the story told by different family members? How did the student's understanding of events in the story change over time?

Homework

Students should read the first chapter of the novel, in which many characters are introduced. Ask students to begin keeping a reader's journal. For the first entry, students should make a list of the characters, describe which one(s) they found most interesting, and why. Who narrates the first chapter?

Ask students to pay close attention to June Kashpaw. What do we learn about her at the beginning of the chapter? How does our opinion of her change as we read further and get additional information?

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Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes within the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

Love Medicine takes place over a 50-year span (1934–1985), a period of change and turmoil for Native Americans. Although real-world events (the Vietnam War, the rise of tribal groups advocating for increased self-determination) figure in the novel, they are kept mostly in the background. Many of the chronic problems of reservation life during this period such as poverty, joblessness, substance abuse, depression, and suicide afflict the novel's characters.

By endowing the main characters with extraordinary endurance and strong family bonds, Erdrich avoids casting them simply as victims of larger societal forces. In fact, other Native American writers have sometimes taken issue with *Love Medicine* and other Erdrich novels for downplaying the challenges facing modern Native Americans.

Discussion Activities

Distribute the Reader's Guide essay "The History of the Chippewa" and Handout One: Native American Education and the U.S. Government and Handout Two: Tips on Reading a Collection of Linked Short Fiction. Divide your class into three groups. Assign each group an essay. Ask students to present what they've learned to the class.

Although June Kashpaw dies in the first seven pages, the reader gradually learns quite a bit about her throughout the rest of the chapter. Ask the students to summarize what they know about June by the end of the chapter, and to locate specific places in the text where that information is delivered to the reader.

Writing Exercise

In the first chapter, Albertine Johnson takes a break from her nursing studies to visit her family. Her mother and aunts make mildly negative comments about her education and her future. Ask students to write a brief essay about the pressures that Albertine experiences on her visit home, and why her relatives might respond as they do to her presence.

Homework

Have students read "Saint Marie," "Wild Geese," and "The Island." They should consider who the speakers are in each of these chapters. Have students write a paragraph about each chapter's narrator in their reader's journals. How does the fact that each chapter has a different first-person narrator alter the reader's experience?

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Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story, with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

Many of *Love Medicine*’s chapters are told from a first-person point of view, with characters who take turns as the narrators of these chapters. However, several chapters are told from a third-person point of view. Students should carefully consider who is narrating each chapter and why Erdrich might have chosen to tell the story from the perspective of that particular character.

Discussion Activities

By this point your students have read the first four chapters of the novel, each of which has a different first-person narrator. Ask the students to identify differences in how, through diction and tone, the characters express themselves. You might also want to discuss the common elements across the chapters and how they help the overall story come together despite the shifting narrative voices.

Ask students to create a chart showing the narrator and point of view for each chapter they have read. They should include whether the chapter is narrated in first person or in third person, who the narrators are, who is the protagonist of the story, and whether the narrator participates in the action. Ask students to continue to update the chart as they read further into the novel.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to rewrite a portion of one of the family scenes in the first chapter from the point of view of a character other than Albertine Johnson. How would the story be different if Gordie Kashpaw or King Kashpaw were the first-person narrator?

Homework

Ask students to read “The Beads” and “Lulu’s Boys” and Handout Three: The Chippewa Creation Story. In their reader’s journals, students should make a list of the characters they’ve encountered so far in the novel and classify them as “major” or “minor.” Students should continue to identify the narrators of each chapter in their journals.

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Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the “protagonist.” The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work’s end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a “hero.” An “antihero” is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist’s journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a “foil,” has traits that contrast with the protagonist’s and highlight important features of the main character’s personality. The most important foil, the “antagonist,” opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

Love Medicine does not have one central protagonist; there are a handful of major characters who serve most frequently as narrators and whose interwoven stories create the plot. These characters are often paired up, with each member of the pair serving as a foil to his or her partner.

Discussion Activities

Discuss Handout Three: The Chippewa Creation Story. Ask your students how understanding the Chippewa creation story increases their understanding of the characters and Chippewa culture portrayed in the novel.

Have students identify various pairings of characters in the novel: Marie and Lulu, Nector and Eli, Marie and Rushes Bear (her mother-in-law). These pairings are not structured as good against evil; typically, each character has virtues and flaws that throw elements of the opposite character into sharper relief. For example, Marie’s dutifulness as a wife and mother (and her refusal to enter into an adulterous relationship with her brother-in-law Eli) makes Lulu’s flexible morals all the more startling. How does Erdrich balance these characters? How does she keep the reader from judging one or the other too harshly?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to pick one of the pairs they’ve identified in the discussion, and list the traits they have in common, and also how they differ. Ask them to identify which member of the pair is more attuned to Chippewa culture. Does one member of the pair embrace tradition while the other shuns it? Are both equally invested in tribal life? Why might Erdrich have chosen to pair characters in this way?

Homework

Students should read “The Plunge of the Brave” and “Flesh and Blood.” Ask students to identify three or four instances of rich, colorful language, particularly metaphors and similes, from the reading assignment. Students should record these passages in their reader’s journals.

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Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Imagery—a word or phrase that refers to sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste)—helps create a physical experience for the reader and adds immediacy to literary language.

Some figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things. Simile is a comparison of two things that initially seem quite different but are shown to have significant resemblance. Similes employ connective words, usually “like,” “as,” “than,” or a verb such as “resembles.” A metaphor is a statement that one thing is something else that, in a literal sense, it is not. By asserting that a thing is something else, a metaphor creates a close association that underscores an important similarity between these two things.

Metaphor is important in *Love Medicine*. In “Flesh and Blood,” Marie tussles with Sister Leopolda over a heavy black spoon, which to Marie is much more than just a spoon. Marie has invested a simple spoon with enormous power and cruelty, symbolizing the oppression, guilt, and misery she experienced under the authority of the Catholic Church. The spoon’s physical presence allows her a physical expression of her rage and hatred.

Discussion Activities

Students should contrast the way Marie uses metaphor in “Flesh and Blood” with Nector’s very different metaphorical language in “The Plunge of the Brave.” Does Nector, with his “taste for candy,” seem to have a gentler world view than Marie? If so, how is this reflected in their language?

Ask the students to find other examples of figurative language in the chapters they’ve read so far. How does this affect the reader’s perception of the characters? Students might also want to locate other extended metaphors in the novel, similar to the spoon passage quoted above.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a brief two-page story about one of their own relatives using figurative language such as metaphor and simile.

Homework

Students should read “A Bridge” and “The Red Convertible.” They should continue to identify the narrators of each chapter. They should also find two or three main symbols from the novel thus far, particularly in the chapters read for tonight’s homework. Remind students to use their reader’s journals for homework assignments.

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Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and re-interpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

Food—of many types, and in various stages of preparation—appears regularly throughout *Love Medicine*. The pies, prepared with so much care by Marie and her daughters in the middle pages of the first chapter, are ruined in the drunken fight at the end of the chapter. Later, Nector attributes the rekindling of his affair with Lulu to their delivery of surplus butter to dozens of neighbors on a hot day. Food is not only a necessity of life, it is also an intrinsic part of human celebration and mourning. The idea of food is at once festive and common, large and particular—strong enough to carry within itself many of the novel's largest ideas.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to identify two or three other instances where food appears in the novel. Ask them to describe the larger ideas about the characters, and the novel's setting, that emerge from these scenes. Are some foods good and others bad? How does food serve as a symbol in the novel?

Have students consider the red convertible. Review the interview with Louise Erdrich in the Reader's Guide. Is the car a symbol, and if so, of what? Is it linked to other cars that have appeared in the novel so far? Why or why not?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to identify another important symbol that appears throughout the novel such as water, fire, or fish. Students should write a short essay about how the symbol serves the larger purposes of the novel, citing specific examples.

Homework

Students should read “Scales” and “Crown of Thorns.” They should continue to identify the narrators of each chapter in their reader's journals. Also ask students to write a short essay on the ways Gordie Kashpaw changes in “Crown of Thorns.”

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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

Because *Love Medicine* features a group of central characters rather than a single protagonist, keeping track of character development is especially complex. Certainly it is easier to consider the growth experienced by characters who appear over and over, like Marie, Lulu, and Nector, rather than the development of characters like Albertine Johnson, who appear infrequently.

Tracking character development in *Love Medicine* is also complicated because the novel does not follow a linear structure—it traces a more circular pattern, beginning in 1981 and then looping back to the 1930s. The Marie we meet in “The World’s Greatest Fisherman” is decades older, and therefore a more nuanced and complex character than the Marie who appears as a girl in “Saint Marie.” The reader’s notions of Marie grow from the older grandmother, to the young girl, then to the early years of motherhood and on into middle age.

Discussion Activities

Divide students into groups. Assign each group one of the main characters. Each group should discuss how their perception of that character changes in the chapters read so far. Students might want to consider contradictory elements within a particular character. For example, Nector seems to be an upstanding father and community member, except for his affair with Lulu. It might also be valuable to discuss the changes that characters undergo and the major life events that bring about those changes, such as Marie’s departure from the Sacred Heart Convent.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write two or three paragraphs about the character in the novel they find the most, or the least, sympathetic. They should describe the traits that make this character sympathetic or unsympathetic, citing specific examples from the text.

Homework

Students should read “Love Medicine” and “Resurrection” and continue to identify the narrators of each chapter in their reader’s journals.

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Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the effects of that climactic action are presented.

As a series of linked stories, *Love Medicine* does not have the classic narrative arc that readers might find in more traditional novels. While it is unlikely that readers will be able to identify a single climax of the novel, there are undoubtedly several significant events that function as turning points in the story. Considered together, these major events reveal a great deal about the characters and how they grow and change in response to life's hurdles and successes. For instance, on the day Lulu's house burns, Marie learns that Nector intended to abandon her for Lulu. She decides to maintain their relationship, despite his infidelity. This confirms for the reader what we already believe about Marie—that she is motivated by practical concerns rather than an idealized notion of love. Marie's choice also prepares the reader for the later chapters, in which she and Lulu become friends.

Discussion Activities

Using their reader's journals as a resource, have the students construct a timeline of the book's main events, identifying major turning points for each character.

Ask students to identify other important plot points in the novel, such as Marie's departure from the convent, Henry Lamartine's suicide, Nector's choking death, and Gordie Kashpaw's suicide. Students will want to consider which of these events, or others they name, are most central to the novel as a whole and shape most profoundly our understanding of the characters and their world.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to rewrite one of the signal events above with a different outcome. Imagine that Lulu's house had not burned, or Marie had thrown Nector out of the house. What if Henry Lamartine's suicide attempt in the river had been unsuccessful? Encourage students to be as creative as possible using metaphor and simile and to carefully choose which narrative voice can best tell the story.

Homework

Students should finish the novel by reading "The Good Years" and "Crossing the Water." Ask them to identify three themes of the novel. Students should also note the narrator of each chapter in their reader's journals.

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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises. Ask students to explore what *Love Medicine* suggests about the following themes by providing specific textual references. Students may also identify their own themes.

Abandonment

Many characters in the book are abandoned by their parents, and others are uncertain, or even mistaken, about who their biological parents were. Lulu has children by several different men. Marie ends up at the convent after living with her aunt; her mother's identity will be revealed to readers of the subsequent novels in this series. But Lipsha Morrissey, perhaps more than any other character, wants to understand his own origins, and by the end of the book his search is successful. Why are so many characters in the novel disconnected from their birth families? How does this knowledge contribute, or fail to contribute, to each character's sense of identity?

Tradition

Lyman is a businessman, focused on material success, while Lipsha carries the special gift of healing and insight from his true family, the Pillagers, who are descended from medicine men and women. Ask your students which character they identify with more. Do students feel that Erdrich is more sympathetic to one character, and therefore a particular way of life? Why or why not?

Love

Nector Kashpaw claims to love both Marie and Lulu. This love triangle is complicated by the fact that each woman is aware of the other's importance to him, and by the sweet friendship that develops between them after Nector's death. Do students find the long-term affair, and the friendship that blooms in its aftermath, credible? Does the women's acceptance of Nector's double life make them more or less sympathetic to the reader? Why or why not?



Homework

Ask students to begin their essays using the Essay Topics, the discussion questions in the Reader's Guide, or their own ideas. Students should use their journal entries as a resource while writing the essays. Outlines are due at the next class period.

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Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Love Medicine, Louise Erdrich's first novel, was both a commercial and critical success, winning the 1984 National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction, the Sue Kaufman Prize for Best First Fiction, the Virginia McCormick Scully Prize, and the *Los Angeles Times* award for fiction. Although Erdrich published a book of poetry and a number of short stories prior to *Love Medicine*, the novel's complex structure and unique, interwoven voices cemented her literary reputation. In addition, the novel's focus on the lives of contemporary Chippewa men and women had a broad, cross-cultural appeal, serving for many readers as a gateway into Native American fiction.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Write these on the board. What elevates a work of fiction to greatness? Then ask them to discuss, within groups, other books they know that include some of these characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *Love Medicine*? Is this a great book?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Erdrich create in *Love Medicine*? How do the individual characters' voices in the novel contribute to its overall tone and feel?

Divide the class into groups and have each group determine the single most important theme of the book. Have a spokesperson from each group explain the group's decision, with references from the text. Write the themes on the board. Do the groups agree?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a letter to a friend, perhaps one who does not like to read, explaining why *Love Medicine* is a good book. The student should make an argument that explains why this book has meaning for all people, not just those who have a special interest in Native Americans.

Homework

Students will finish their essays and turn them in the next time the class meets.

Native American Education and the U.S. Government

Since the arrival of Europeans to this continent, European nations and the U.S. federal government have entered into 800 treaties (fewer than 400 were ratified) with various groups of Native Americans. Broadly interpreted, these treaties are formal agreements between sovereign entities mapping out actions and provisions that each side is to follow. In exchange for land and promises of peace, Native Americans received continued access to traditional hunting and fishing lands and provisions such as education provided by the government. Of these provisions, education has been very controversial.

From 1879 with the founding of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School until well into the twentieth century, Native American education programs primarily focused on the assimilation of the population into American society. Off-reservation boarding schools stripped young Native Americans of every vestige of their native cultures and forced them to accept Anglo traditions, foods, manners, and even names and religion. These attempts to assimilate Native American children in such a harsh and alien environment were not successful, and by 1905 the government opened day schools on reservations where children still lived at home with their families while attending school.

With the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, the government began to recognize that Native American education should encourage Native values and culture. The number of community schools nearly doubled, and job and vocational training was directed toward rural and reservation life.

In the 1940s the government made some attempts at bilingual education, but there were few native-language texts available. By World War II these progressive trends were under assault; reservation

schools closed and off-reservation boarding schools again became prevalent. By the early 1960s, however, Native American leaders pushed for self-determination and challenged the attempt to return to earlier doctrines.

In 1966, President Johnson appointed Robert La Follette Bennett, a Native American, commissioner of Indian affairs. In 1969, the Kennedy Report on Indian Education noted that “the dominant policy of the federal government toward the American Indian has been one of coercive assimilation” and the policy “has had disastrous effects on the education of Indian children.”

Native American boarding schools revised their curricula and created opportunities for local tribal governance. Colleges—like Dartmouth, where Erdrich enrolled in 1972—built departments of Native American Studies.

The Indian Education Act of 1972 provides “direct financial support for the education of all American Indian and Native Alaskan students in public, tribal, as well as Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) schools.” This legislation has been challenged repeatedly in recent years, due to budget cuts and shifting political priorities. In 1998 President Clinton signed the Executive Order on American Indian and Alaskan Native Education. Its six goals include improved reading and math scores, improved science education, and increased high school graduation and post-secondary attendance rates. Today many Native American tribes and organizations are pushing forward with the establishment of charter schools to increase community involvement and educational reform.



Tips on Reading a Collection of Linked Short Fiction

A critical and commercial success since its first publication in 1984, *Love Medicine* is considered a bold look at Native American life and the ways in which tribal traditions and mainstream culture collide. Many of the chapters in the book were published first as stand-alone stories in literary magazines. Although each story or chapter stands alone successfully, the book also works as a longer narrative, with each section contributing to a unified whole.

The book's chapters are told from the perspective of several different narrators weaving together the lives of two Chippewa families. As you read the book and notice a shift in the narrative perspective, ask yourself why the author might have chosen to change the point of view.

Each story in the book has its own protagonist and conflict. Readers may want to ask themselves whose story is being told. What does the protagonist desire more than anything else? What stands in his or her way? Make notes about the characters who appear in each story and how their roles change over the course of the book.

Setting also plays an important role in understanding the individual stories and how they fit together. Setting can affect the tone and mood of a work of fiction. Much of the action

in *Love Medicine* takes place on a reservation in North Dakota, but there are also scenes off the reservation. Readers should be aware of changes in setting, and how those changes vary even within a single story. Be aware of how the narrator describes the setting and what emotions those descriptions are intended to evoke.

Louise Erdrich uses recurring characters, places, and objects as symbols throughout *Love Medicine*. Readers should note each place where these symbols appear in the text and consider how they contribute to a story's meaning. If a symbol is used in more than one story, it's important to note how the symbolic value of the object affects the book as a whole.

Once readers have read and appreciated the stories as separate pieces of writing, they can begin to discover how they work together to create a unified whole. Characters, settings, and events recur throughout the book, giving readers additional perspective on the way some Native Americans straddle two cultural identities that Erdrich describes as having "one foot on tribal lands and one foot in ordinary middle-class life."



The Chippewa Creation Story

Chippewa is actually an Anglo mispronunciation of the word “Ojibwa,” which may have referred to the puckered seams in people’s moccasins. In their language, the Chippewa call themselves “Anishinaabe,” which means *the original people*. The Anishinaabe have their own creation story which was recorded on birch bark scrolls and was passed down orally through the generations. In their origin story, their central figure is *Gitche Manito*, or the Great Mystery (also called the Good Spirit), who first created Mother Earth. Gitche Manito used Mother Earth and her elements to make the animals, the plants, and then the Anishinaabe.

Gitche Manito sent birds to spread the seeds of life to all of the four directions and to the land above and the land below. The Great Mystery made plants with the ability to heal, feed animals, and provide beauty. Lastly, he took the four elements of rock, water, fire, and wind to mold the Anishinaabe and blew the breath of life into Anishinaabe through a sacred shell called *megis* (cowrie shell). Gitche Manito then lowered the original (first) Anishinaabe to Earth. Men and women were the last life forms created. Therefore, the Anishinaabeg (plural) feel that the plants and animals are elders, having lived on Mother Earth longer.

The Great Mystery then felt pity for the Anishinaabeg, because they experienced hunger and sickness, and did not know how to make the best use of the natural world around them. So Gitche Manito sent his messenger *Nanaboozhoo* to help them use food and plants to live long lives and overcome suffering. “Nanapush,” which appears as a tribal surname in *Love Medicine*, is an alternate spelling for *Nanaboozhoo*. He was both a trickster and a teacher, exemplifying the wrong and right ways to live.

The otter brought the teachings of the Four Sacred Directions to the Anishinaabeg, as well as being a teacher for sacred ceremonies used to cure the sick. The Anishinaabeg who followed these teachings were called the *Midewiwin*, or Grand Medicine Society. Both men and women could become members (called *Mide*), although it was thought that initiates into the group must already have the gift of healing, which was bestowed by the Creator and could not be taught. Midewiwin societies are still in existence and very active today.

