



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Reader Resources

Love Medicine

by Louise Erdrich



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“To be mixed blood is great for a writer. I have one foot on tribal lands and one foot in ordinary middle-class life.”

Preface

A novel-in-stories about passion, family, and the importance of cultural identity, *Love Medicine* examines the struggle to balance Native American tradition with the modern world. Using an eclectic range of comic and tragic voices, Louise Erdrich leads the reader through the interwoven lives of two Chippewa families living in North Dakota. This modern classic is an often sad, sometimes funny look at the ways family and tradition bind us together.



What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



About the Book

Introduction to the Book

Good writing means revising, and sometimes the process never ends. Since *Love Medicine* was initially released in 1984, several editions of the novel have been published. The 1993 version contained material not included originally, such as the stories “Lyman’s Luck” and “The Tomahawk Factory.”

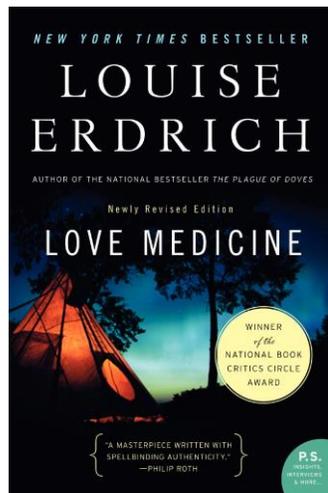
Revisiting the book for the twenty-fifth anniversary edition, Erdrich felt that these two stories “interrupted the flow” of the novel’s final pages and chose not to include them. Erdrich explains in her author’s note at the end of the 2009 edition that she now understands she is “writing one long book in which the main chapters are also books” and that the characters in *Love Medicine* “live out their destinies” in her later work.

In a 1991 interview with *Writer’s Digest*, Erdrich noted, “People in [Native American] families make everything into a story ... People just sit and the stories start coming, one after another. I suppose that when you grow up constantly hearing the stories rise, break, and fall, it gets into you somehow.” These storytelling techniques manifest themselves in Erdrich’s fiction through the distinct voices of her characters and her complex, layered storylines.

Structured as a novel-in-stories, *Love Medicine* spans the half-century from 1934 to 1984 in rural North Dakota. The book’s chapters are told from the perspective of several different narrators weaving together the lives of two Chippewa families. The novel is not a linear path through time. Instead, it begins in 1981, loops back to the 1930s, and then proceeds forward into the mid-1980s.

In the book’s opening pages June Kashpaw, a renegade and free spirit, freezes to death in a snowstorm. The book then looks back to the departure of June’s aunt Marie Lazarre from the Sacred Heart Convent in 1934. On Marie’s way home she meets Nector Kashpaw, who will eventually become her husband. Nector had been romantically involved with Lulu Nanapush, but his chance encounter with Marie changes all three lives and their families forever.

By allowing these characters and others to tell their own stories with varied voices and perspectives, Erdrich created both memorable individuals and a testament to the ways that family can bind us together.



Major Characters in the Book

Marie Lazarre Kashpaw

Marie claims to be “part-Indian,” although she was born into a family of French descent. She spends part of her youth in Catholic school, and eventually enters the Sacred Heart Convent.

“I was ignorant. I was near age fourteen. The length of sky is just about the size of my ignorance.” —Marie Lazarre Kashpaw, in *Love Medicine*

Nector Kashpaw

Nector is a successful, educated tribal leader. He marries Marie, but in middle age he resumes a relationship with his old flame, Lulu. Years later Nector’s dementia requires that he and Marie move into senior housing, where Lulu also lives.

“I never wanted much, and I needed even less, but what happened was that I got everything handed to me on a plate. It came from being a Kashpaw, I used to think. Our family was respected as the last hereditary leaders of this tribe.” —Nector Kashpaw, in *Love Medicine*

Lulu Nanapush Lamartine

“No one ever understood my wild and secret ways,” Lulu claims, by way of explaining her many love affairs. Despite her wandering eye, Lulu is a good mother, raising eight boys, and finally a girl, over many years.

“You know Lulu Lamartine if you know life is made up of three kinds of people—those who live it, those afraid to, those in between. My mother is the first. She has no fear, and that’s what’s wrong with her.” —Lyman Lamartine, in *Love Medicine*

Lyman Lamartine

Lyman is the son of Lulu and Nector, conceived during her marriage to Henry Lamartine. After Lyman witnesses his brother’s death by drowning, he falls apart.

“My one talent was I could always make money. I had a touch for it, unusual in a Chippewa.” —Lyman Lamartine, in *Love Medicine*

Lipsha Morrissey

Lipsha is blessed (or cursed) with “the touch,” the gift of healing. He was raised by Marie Lazarre Kashpaw, whom he thinks of as his grandmother, but resists learning his birth mother’s identity.

“I know the tricks of mind and body inside out without ever having trained for it, because I got the touch. It’s a thing you got to be born with. I got secrets in my hands that nobody ever knew to ask... The medicine flows out of me. The touch.” —Lipsha Morrissey, in *Love Medicine*

About the Author

Louise Erdrich (b. 1954)

A member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, Louise Erdrich was born in Little Falls, Minnesota, in 1954, the oldest of seven children. Her mother is of French and Ojibwa heritage; her father is German American. Erdrich's parents both taught at a Bureau of Indian Affairs school located on a nearby reservation.



Louise Erdrich (Photo by Persia Erdrich, courtesy of HarperCollins Publishers)

Erdrich was raised in a literature-rich environment; her father often recited the poetry of Robert Frost and Lord Byron from memory. He also introduced young Louise and her siblings to William Shakespeare, and encouraged them to write stories of their own. Her father paid Louise a nickel for each of her earliest stories, and her mother created homemade book covers for these works. Erdrich has joked, "at an early age I felt myself to be a published writer earning substantial royalties."

Erdrich entered Dartmouth College in 1972, where she met writer Michael Dorris. He had also arrived at Dartmouth that fall, as the head of the college's newly-formed Native American studies department. Although they did not develop a close relationship during Erdrich's time as an undergraduate, they became reacquainted years later and were married in 1981.

After graduation, Erdrich taught poetry and writing through the State Arts Council of North Dakota, and balanced her writing life with a variety of jobs: in construction, as a lifeguard, and as a weigher of commercial trucks. This last experience found its way into *Love Medicine*, in the chapter titled "Scales."

In 1978, Erdrich enrolled in the graduate writing program at Johns Hopkins University, and began sending her poems and stories to publishers. In 1982 her story "The World's Greatest Fishermen" which eventually became the first chapter of *Love Medicine*, won the *Chicago Tribune's* Nelson Algren fiction award. Many of the chapters in *Love Medicine* were first published as stand-alone stories.

During their marriage, Erdrich and Dorris often collaborated on their writing, reviewing multiple drafts and reading their work out loud to each other.

Michael Dorris had three adopted children, all of Native American heritage, at the time of his marriage to Erdrich, and the couple had three biological daughters. The couple separated around 1995, and Dorris died two years later.

Erdrich owns an independent bookstore, Birchbark Books, in Minneapolis.

An Interview with Louise Erdrich

On February 27, 2009, Josephine Reed of the National Endowment for the Arts interviewed Louise Erdrich. Excerpts from their conversation follow.

Josephine Reed: Tell me about your childhood.

Louise Erdrich: My mother is French and Chippewa—that's the same as Ojibwa or Anishinaabe—and my father is German. My parents were teachers for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. I grew up in a small town surrounded by a mixture of native people and farm people and small town people, and I always just accepted that everybody accepted who I was and I accepted who they were. I knew about Ojibwa traditions because of my grandfather, but I didn't really understand what was happening in that world. It took me a long time. I really had to look for the knowledge, and a lot of wonderful people helped me. But I was raised as a Catholic and went to a Catholic school.

JR: The beginning of *Love Medicine* sets up an extraordinary geographic scene. Can you describe the plains?

LE: I grew up in the Red River Valley, where you really just have a flat tableland and horizon. To me, the intimacy of the detail on the ground was always so wonderful and beautiful. The changing landscape of the clouds was something that was always there for me. So I didn't grow up wandering among trees, or with streams of water around me; I grew up really looking at the sky.

JR: How do you summarize the plot of *Love Medicine*?

LE: The plot is really two words. The plot is *going home*. In the beginning, a woman—named June—who has seen everything and has come to the very end of her despair begins to walk toward home, not knowing that she's going to pass into a blizzard. By the end of the book, through many turns and twists, it is her son who finally brings her home.

JR: Yet you begin the book with June's death.

LE: June doesn't really die in the book because her spirit is living on through other people, through this odd form of a car. The cars are vehicles for the spirit in this book and the car, the Firebird, is a part of June that comes and goes—it even serves as an escape, as a vehicle for a sort of rebirth.

In the end, she is somehow allowed to come home through the agency of that car.

JR: Your characters are flawed and imperfect, but they still have grace.

LE: The doctrine of grace really came to me over and over in the writing of the book because often the characters who didn't expect it, or want it, or even look for it became the vessels of grace. There's a great deal of Catholicism and traditional medicine—it's a great mixture—in the book.

JR: Where did the character of Lulu come from?

LE: I love Lulu, and I really don't know where she came from. She loves the tremendous sensual beauty of experience in the world, and she says, "I was in love with the whole world and all that lived in its rainy arms." She's able to take in anything that happens and turn it into something that's rich and exciting. And she somehow has a little magic in her, in the way she handles her sons.

JR: Louise, is there anything you'd like to add?

LE: The Big Read is a huge opportunity for people to look further into the existence of Native American people. There are over 560 federally recognized tribes in the United States. If anything, I just hope someone goes and opens up another book by another native writer after this.

Historical and Literary Context

The Life and Times of Louise Erdrich

1950s

- 1952: U.S. government initiates the Urban Indian Relocation Program to encourage Native Americans to move to designated urban areas for better jobs and economic opportunities.
- 1954: Louise Erdrich born.

1960s

- 1968: American Indian Movement (AIM) founded.
- A small group of Native Americans take symbolic control of San Francisco's Alcatraz Island in 1969, remaining there until their forcible removal by the government in 1971.
- During the Vietnam War, nearly 90,000 Native Americans fight for the U.S., giving them the highest participation per capita of any ethnic group.

1970s

- 1970: Four students are killed and nine wounded by Ohio National Guardsmen at Kent State University in May.
- 1972: The Indian Education Act guarantees "adequate and appropriate educational services" for Native Americans.
- 1972: Erdrich enrolls in Dartmouth College's first co-educational class.

1980s

- 1981: Erdrich marries Michael Dorris.
- 1988: Congress approves the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA), designed to control the tribal gaming industry.
- Erdrich publishes *Love Medicine* in 1984, *The Beet Queen* in 1986, and *Tracks* in 1988.

1990s

- 1990: Congress passes the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), to ensure the return of Native American human remains, funerary, and sacred items to tribes.
- 1992: Ben Nighthorse Campbell of Colorado is the first Native American elected to the U.S. Senate.
- 1993: New and expanded edition of *Love Medicine* is published.

2000s

- 2000: For the first time, the U.S. Census includes a space for Native Americans to specify their tribal affiliation.
- 2004: The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian opens its doors to the public on September 21.
- 2009: A 25th Anniversary edition of *Love Medicine* is published.

The History of the Chippewa

The Chippewa are also known as Ojibway, Ojibwa, Ojibwe, Saulteaux, or Anishinaabe. The word "Chippewa" is a mispronunciation of "Ojibwa," a native word that translates loosely as "puckered," believed to be a reference to the puckered seams found on the moccasins worn by the tribe. The Chippewa call themselves "Anishinaabe," which means, *the original people*. They are members of the Algonquin language family, sharing similarities with languages spoken by the Cree, Potawatomi, Blackfoot, and Cheyenne. Algonquin-speaking tribes today stretch as far south as North Carolina, and west into the Rockies.

Early histories of the Chippewa place the tribe as far north as Canada's Hudson Bay, or further east near the mouth of the St. Lawrence River. Around 900 A.D., they moved westward, settling into the woodlands of Canada, Michigan, and Minnesota. Later, some Chippewa also moved into North Dakota and Montana. By the seventeenth century, when the French began to arrive, the Chippewa were established throughout Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

The land was rich with timber, minerals, game, and wild rice, making it an ideal home for the Chippewa. The environment provided an abundance of building materials for homes and canoes to navigate the many rivers and lakes. The Chippewa were successful fur traders with the French and British. The fur trade resulted in intermarriages between the Chippewa and Cree and European fur traders, which strengthened alliances between the groups. The children of these intermarriages became known as *Métis* or *Michif*.

The Chippewa fought alongside the French in the French and Indian War, and with the British during the War of 1812. In 1815 the tribe began to formalize a series of treaties with the U.S. government, ceding control of huge tracts of land in exchange for the guarantee of reservation lands, and for the provision of educational and other services. The LaPointe Treaty of 1854 transferred extensive tribal lands to the government in exchange for only six reservations, which were not large enough to accommodate all of the tribal members who would be relocated under the treaty's terms. But unlike many other tribes, the Chippewa were not forced to migrate away from the homelands they had established centuries earlier, although a few groups did eventually move farther west, to newly established reservations in the Dakotas.

In 1882, President Chester Arthur established the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota (where Louise Erdrich is a member). Today the reservation (only 11 miles from the Canadian border) includes more than 30,000 enrolled Chippewa and Métis members.

Today's Chippewa live both on reservations and in rural areas and large urban centers. People living on the reservation face unemployment or underemployment due to the instability of seasonal jobs like forestry or trapping for income.

In recent decades reservations have successfully developed business operations, from manufacturing to tourism to casino development, for other sources of income. Many Chippewa are benefiting from tribally run schools and colleges that offer courses in business as well as traditional arts and language.

Other Works/Adaptations

Erdrich and Her Other Works

Louise Erdrich's early literary life included Shakespeare and English poetry, as well as the oral storytelling traditions of her Native American forebears. This exposure to a rich variety of styles and forms is reflected in the scope and sheer number of her books. In addition to many novels (including one co-written with her then-husband Michael Dorris), Erdrich has published children's books, volumes of poetry, short fiction, and works of non-fiction.

Love Medicine was published in 1984, to both critical and commercial acclaim. Several of Erdrich's subsequent novels—*The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988), *The Bingo Palace* (1994), and *Tales of Burning Love* (1996)—feature characters who first appeared in *Love Medicine*. The 1993 "expanded edition" of *Love Medicine* includes four new chapters that link key events and characters in that novel to those of *The Bingo Palace*.

Like *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen* has multiple narrators, but the focus in this novel is on German-American families in the fictional town of Argus, North Dakota. Like the earlier novel, *The Beet Queen* concerns itself with issues of parenting and abandonment, focusing on fourteen-year-old Karl Adare and his younger sister, Mary, who arrive in Argus in search of their aunt Fritzie, after being abandoned by their mother. The children are soon separated, and the novel follows their individual narratives over several decades.

Tracks functions as a "prequel" to *Love Medicine*. Here Erdrich explores the conflict between Catholicism and native beliefs through the elder generation of characters from *Love Medicine*: Eli Kashpaw, Fleur Pillager, and the elder Nanapush. The alternating narrators in this novel often present conflicting versions of the same event, casting doubt on each other's credibility and forcing the reader to choose sides.

In *The Bingo Palace*, Erdrich sets two of the younger characters from *Love Medicine* in opposition to each other. Lipsha Morrissey and Lyman Lamartine are rivals in love with the same woman, Shawnee Ray Toose. Lipsha is a dreamer, gifted in the old ways of tribal healing, while Lyman is a practical and ambitious businessman. These two men may represent choices—old ways versus new—for today's Native Americans.

One of Erdrich's more recent works of fiction, *The Plague of Doves* (2008), is also a novel-in-stories. The novel, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, opens with the 1911 slaughter of a North Dakota farming family. Three Native Americans are wrongly accused of the crime and lynched, but one survives. This survivor's granddaughter, Evelina, becomes the novel's

main narrator, showing the reader how the earlier crimes affect families, and indeed the entire town, over many generations. *The Round House* (2012) is the second book in this trilogy, and *LaRose* (2016) is the third.

Selected Works by Louise Erdrich

Poetry

- *Baptism of Desire*, 1989
- *Original Fire*, 2003

Novels

- *Love Medicine*, 1984
- *The Beet Queen*, 1986
- *Tracks*, 1988
- *The Bingo Palace*, 1994
- *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, 2001
- *The Master Butchers Singing Club*, 2003
- *Four Souls*, 2005
- *The Painted Drum*, 2005
- *The Plague of Doves*, 2008
- *Shadow Tag*, 2010
- *The Round House*, 2012
- *LaRose*, 2016

Middle Readers/Young Adult

- *The Birchbark House*, 1999
- *The Game of Silence*, 2005
- *The Porcupine Year*, 2008
- *Chickadee*, 2012

Discussion Questions

1. *Love Medicine* does not have one central protagonist. It could be argued that Marie Kashpaw and Lulu Lamartine, as matriarchs of their respective families, share the role of “main character.” The two women are brought closer through their decades-long fight over Nector Kashpaw. Is one of these women more sympathetic to the reader than the other? Why or why not?
2. Nector and Eli Kashpaw are brothers and members of the eldest generation in the novel. Nector is an educated family man, while Eli is quieter and more reclusive. In what ways are the brothers alike? In what other ways do they differ?
3. What important events are told and retold from more than one character’s point of view? How do these retellings shape the reader’s understanding of the events?
4. June Kashpaw appears as a character in the novel only in its opening pages, but the other characters remember her and speak of her frequently. Why is June Kashpaw so important to Marie Kashpaw? Why does Lipsha Morrissey care about June?
5. As a young girl, Marie Kashpaw is terrorized by Sister Leopolda in the Sacred Heart Convent. Why does Marie decide to visit Leopolda at the convent so many years later, taking her daughter Zelda with her?
6. This novel is steeped with death and loss, yet there are also comic moments throughout. How do these events relieve tension within the novel?
7. How does Native American culture clash with mainstream American culture throughout *Love Medicine*? Describe some of the recurring conflicts in the novel, and how the characters react to or retreat from them.
8. Is Lulu Lamartine a good person? How and why do her values differ from the other characters in the novel? Is she a sympathetic character? Why or why not?
9. Lipsha Morrissey and Lyman Lamartine, although close in age, are opposites in many ways. How does the reader react to these two very different characters? How do they represent the options available to modern Native Americans?
10. As a novel-in-stories, *Love Medicine* does not have a traditional, linear plot. Does the novel have a climax? Does it have more than one? Why or why not?

Additional Resources

If you want to read books that have influenced Erdrich, you might enjoy:

- Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, 1989
- Naguib Mahfouz's *The Harafish*, 1977
- Flannery O'Connor's *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, 1965
- Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1885

If you want to read more literature about Native American life, you might enjoy:

- Sherman Alexie's *Ten Little Indians*, 2003
- Deborah Magpie Earling's *Perma Red*, 2002
- Joy Harjo's *How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems*, 2002
- Linda Hogan's *Mean Spirit*, 1990
- Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, 1977
- James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*, 1974

Credits

Works Cited

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An interview with Josephine Reed for The Big Read. February 2009.

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