



Voices from the Gaps **Vg**

Louise Erdrich

“

The earth was full of life and there were dandelions growing out the window, thick as thieves, already seeded, fat as big yellow plungers. She let my hand go. I got up. “I’ll go out and dig a few dandelions,” I told her. Outside, the sun was hot and heavy as a hand on my back. I felt it flow down my arms, out my fingers, arrowing through the ends of the fork into the earth. With every root I prized up there was a return, as if I was kin to its secret lesson. The touch got stronger as I worked through the grassy afternoon. Uncurling from me like a seed out of the blackness where I was lost, the touch spread. The spiked leaves full of bitter mother’s milk. A buried root. A nuisance people dig up and throw in the sun to wither. A globe of frail seeds that’s indestructible.

— Love Medicine

”



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1954
- * Native American novelist and poet
- * *Love Medicine*, her first novel, was published in 1984

Biography

In a 1985 interview with Laura Coltelli, Karen Louise Erdrich was asked if she considered herself to be a poet or a storyteller. Erdrich replied, “Oh, a storyteller, a writer.” Her own life story, as well as her novels and poems, are what make Louise Erdrich so widely known. Erdrich, the oldest of seven children, was born in Little Falls, Minnesota, on June 7, 1954. The daughter of French Ojibwe mother and German American father, Louise Erdrich is a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. Erdrich’s large extended family lived nearby, affecting her writing life from an early age.

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Louise Erdrich

Biography continued

Her father introduced Louise to William Shakespeare's plays and encouraged Louise and her sisters to write their own stories (Giles 44). Erdrich comments in a 1991 *Writer's Digest* interview, "The people in our families made everything into a story. They love to tell a good story. People just sit and the stories start coming, one after another. You just sort of grab the tail of the last person's story: it reminds you of something and you keep going on. I suppose that when you grow up constantly hearing the stories rise, break and fall, it gets into you somehow" (Giles 43). The exposure to storytelling had a prodigious influence on Louise's shaping and creation of plot; it was as important as literary influences if not more.

Erdrich attended primarily public schools until she matriculated into Dartmouth College in 1972 as part of the school's first coeducational class. In that same year, Michael Dorris moved to Hanover, New Hampshire, to join Dartmouth's Native American Studies Department. Louise took one of Michael's seminars; they became friends and kept in touch after she graduated. At Dartmouth, Professor A. B. Paulsen noticed Erdrich's poetic talent. Later Louise published a poem in *Ms. Magazine*, and was awarded an American Academy of Poets Prize during her junior year.

After completing her undergraduate degree, Erdrich taught poetry and writing to young people through a position at the State Arts Council of North Dakota. She worked a variety of low-paying jobs, from waitressing to weighing trucks on the interstate. These occupations have made their way into Erdrich's fiction, increasing its verisimilitude, and broadening her understanding of the human experience. Erdrich was awarded a fellowship to be part of John Hopkins University's writing program in 1979. She then worked as an editor of the Boston Indian Council newspaper, *The Circle*.

Erdrich and Dorris met again at Dartmouth, where Louise had been invited to give a reading. They exchanged addresses before Dorris left for a sabbatical in New Zealand and Erdrich for a writing residency. Their correspondence became an exchange of manuscripts, and they reunited the following year. Dorris returned to Dartmouth, and Erdrich came back as a writer-in-residence. They were married in October 1981. During their marriage, Erdrich and Dorris, considered themselves as each other's greatest literary influences. They publicly said that they collaborated on every single piece of writing, every single word.



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Biography continued

Writing intuitively, allowing characters to tell their own stories with their own voice and at their own pace, writing without chronological structure, writing prose daily, and working on several projects at once are some pieces of the process of Louise Erdrich's writing life. She revises extensively, referring incessantly to old journals for ideas and material. In her approach to work, Erdrich continuously interacts, revising and adding to them in subsequent editions. She and Dorris separated in 1995; Dorris committed suicide in March 1997. Erdrich now lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, with her three youngest children.

Erdrich is the author of several novels including *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen*, *Tracks*, *Tales of Burning Love*, and *The Antelope Wife*. She collaborated and co-wrote novels with Michael Dorris, and her own poetry and short fiction has appeared in the *Prairie Schooner*, the *Paris Review*, and the *Massachusetts Review*. The recipient of the 1975 Academy of American Poets Prize and the Best Fiction Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, Louise Erdrich has received numerous other awards and prizes.

In looking at both biographical and fictional elements of Erdrich's stories, it is apparent that she embodies the core of America's multiculturalism. Being born "mixed blood," Louise Erdrich explores what cultural identity means. In a 1986 interview in the *Chicago Tribune*, Erdrich comments: "My fondest hope is that people will be reading me in 10 or 20 years from now as someone who has written about the American experience in all of its diversity."





Louise Erdrich

Biography continued

Although two books of Erdrich's poetry, *Imagination* (1981) and *Jacklight* (1984), had already been published by the time *Love Medicine* (1984) appeared in publication, Erdrich's first novel was clearly responsible for her eruption into academic and popular success as a writer. *Love Medicine*, a collection of interrelated short stories, features characters and speakers from four Anishinaabe families: the Kashpaws, the Lamartines, the Pillagers, and the Morrisseys. Erdrich represents the families in non-hierarchical terms by employing speakers of various ages and stations within the community. Furthermore, the fifty year span of the novel is related to the reader not chronologically, but instead in a cyclical manner as the book opens in 1980, weaves its way back to the 1930's, and finally returns to the early 1980's. Erdrich's narrative technique ultimately accomplishes a holistic temporal view of the Anishinaabe culture in which present occurrences cannot be isolated from the past.

Interestingly, Erdrich's initial attempts to find a publisher for her first novel were unsuccessful until her husband, Michael Dorris, took it upon himself to promote the novel, sending requests for publication on homemade stationery with "Michael Dorris Agency" printed at the top. The novel, published by Holt, quickly became a best seller. Erdrich received the Sue Kaufman Prize for Best First Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and obtained the respect of many fellow writers. Toni Morrison hailed Erdrich's novel, writing, "the beauty of *Love Medicine* saves us from being devastated by its power," and Philip Roth applauded the author's "originality, authority, tenderness, and pitiless wild wit."

According to Erdrich, though, the most important praise for *Love Medicine* came from the thousands of Native American readers who wrote thanking Erdrich for her portrayal of "real" Indian life. Many of the author's Native American fans commented on her ability to employ realistic speech mannerisms and true-to-life occurrences in the reservation setting. When Erdrich accepted the National Book Critics Circle award for the year's best novelist, she acknowledged the influence of her Anishinaabe heritage, saying, "I accept this award in the spirit of the people who speak through this book." Erdrich received additional awards for *Love Medicine*, including the Virginia Scully Award for Best Book Dealing with Western Indians (1984) and the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation (1985).



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Biography continued

Erdrich returned to the four central families of *Love Medicine* in three later novels: *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988), and *The Bingo Palace* (1994). In 1993, Erdrich revised and enlarged *Love Medicine* to fully integrate *The Bingo Palace* into her tetralogy. The chapters she added, “The Island,” “Resurrection,” “The Tomahawk Factory,” and “Lyman’s Luck,” serve as a transition to key events and themes that Erdrich would later write about in *The Bingo Palace*.

In addition to her tetralogy, Erdrich also co-wrote a novel with Michael Dorris entitled *The Crown of Columbus* (1991), and published an anthology of poetry called *Baptism of Desire* (1989). In *The Blue Jay’s Dance* (1995), which is comprised of nature essays, cultural notes, recipes, and insights about motherhood, Erdrich takes a refreshing departure from fiction and poetry writing. The author’s next novel, *Tales of Burning Love* (1996), loosely involves some characters from her tetralogy, but distinguishes itself more as a novel about male/female relationships. Erdrich’s novel *The Antelope Wife* (1998) represents a thematic and stylistic return to her earlier works as it addresses the intersection of Anishinaabe and Euro-American cultures with a focus on temporal continuity.

Critical analysis of Erdrich’s work has generally, though not exclusively, focused on her tetralogy. Critics often make note of her narrative style, her cyclical portrayal of time, her technical writing ability, her use of tragi-comedy, and of the overall cultural significance of her novels. Cultural interpretations of the tetralogy, which generally attempt to relate Erdrich’s work to her Anishinaabe heritage, abound. Literary analysts have related Erdrich’s portrayal of time to Native American ritual time as opposed to Euro-American linear chronology; furthermore, the author’s narrative structure, they note, centers around interrelationships rather than social hierarchy.

Many cultural interpretations of Erdrich’s tetralogy call attention to the author’s use of the Trickster character of Native American mythologies. Many critics compare the character of Gerry in *Love Medicine*, and Nanapush in *Tracks to the Trickster*, who is by most accounts a people’s champion, a joker/healer, a challenger to the gods. Another theme that cultural interpretations focus on is oral tradition. Analysts point out the tension between the spoken word of Erdrich’s characters, and the written word of the author herself. James Flavin proposes that this tension is most apparent in the character of Nanapush in *Tracks*, as he is at once highly literate and distrustful of the written word.



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The tension between Christian and Anishinaabe belief systems is another topic of interest to critical analysts. The two systems as they appear in Erdrich's novels are not isolated from one another; rather, they coexist, if not harmoniously, in many of her characters. Pauline/Sister Leopolda of *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen*, and *Tracks* has been of particular interest to these sorts of interpretations. This relationship between Christianity and Anishinaabe beliefs is likely a reflection of Erdrich's own experiences as a person of mixed heritage, and one can very clearly see the two religions existing beside one another in the author's second volume of poetry, *Baptism of Desire*, as well.

Erdrich has received some criticism from her peers, most notably from Leslie Marmon Silko, who feels that *Love Medicine* falls short of being a realistic representation of the hardships of Native American life. While Erdrich understands that she, as a popular Native American author, is seen as a political figure by some, she does not intend for her writings to be a vehicle for her own political beliefs. Indeed, some analysts feel that Erdrich's unconventional narrative techniques are simply not suited for overt politicism. Other critics note that Erdrich, while perhaps failing to provide an explicit political directive, implicitly communicates to her readers a message of personal survival and cultural continuity.



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