
Master Butcher's Singing Club by Louise Erdrich

1954-

Also known as: Karen Louise Erdrich, Milou North, Heidi Louise, Louise Erdrich

Birth: July 6, 1954 in Little Falls, Minnesota

Occupation: Writer

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Sidelights

The daughter of a Chippewa Indian mother and a German-American father, Louise Erdrich explores Native-American themes in her works, with major characters representing both sides of her heritage. In an award-winning series of related novels and short stories, Erdrich has visited and re-visited the North Dakota lands where her ancestors met and mingled, creating "a Chippewa experience in the context of the European American novelistic tradition," to quote P. Jane Hafen in the Dictionary of Literary Biography. Many critics claim Erdrich has remained true to her Native ancestors' mythic and artistic visions while writing fiction that candidly explores the cultural issues facing modern-day Native Americans and mixed heritage Americans. As an essayist for Contemporary Novelists observed: "Erdrich's accomplishment is that she is weaving a body of work that goes beyond portraying contemporary Native American life as descendants of a politically dominated people to explore the great universal questions--questions of identity, pattern versus randomness, and the meaning of life itself." In fact, as Hafen put it, Erdrich's "diverse imageries, subjects, and textual strategies reaffirm imperatives of American Indian survival."

A contributor to Contemporary Popular Writers credited Erdrich with a body of work that is "more interested in love and survival than in recrimination." The critic added: "Past wrongs and present hardships do figure in her work but chiefly as the backdrop against which the task of 'protecting and celebrating' takes on added force and urgency.... Erdrich's sense of loss never gives way to a sense of grievance; her characteristic tone is hopeful, not mournful, and springs from her belief in the persistence and viability of certain Native American values and the vision to which they give rise." The author's creative impulse has led to a significant accomplishment. Elizabeth Blair declared in *World and I*: "In an astonishing, virtuoso performance sustained over more than two decades, Erdrich has produced ... interlinked novels that braid the lives of a series of fallible, lovable, and unpredictable characters of German, Cree, métis, and Ojibwe heritage." Blair concluded: "The painful history of Indian-white relations resonates throughout her work. In her hands we laugh and cry while listening to and absorbing home truths that, taken to heart, have the power to change our world. We listen because these truths come sinew-stitched into the very fabric of the tapestry she weaves so artfully."

Erdrich's first year at Dartmouth College, 1972, was the year the college began admitting women, as well as the year the Native-American studies department was established. The author's future husband and collaborator, anthropologist Michael Dorris, was hired to chair the department. In his class, Erdrich began the exploration of her own ancestry that would eventually inspire her novels. Intent on balancing her academic training with a broad range of practical knowledge, Erdrich told Miriam Berkley in an interview with *Publishers Weekly*, "I ended up taking some really crazy jobs, and I'm glad I did. They turned



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out to have been very useful experiences, although I never would have believed it at the time." In addition to working as a lifeguard, waitress, poetry teacher at prisons, and construction flag signaler, Erdrich became an editor for the Circle, a Boston Indian Council newspaper. She told Writers Digest interviewer Michael Schumacher: "Settling into that job and becoming comfortable with an urban community--which is very different from the reservation community--gave me another reference point. There were lots of people with mixed blood, lots of people who had their own confusions. I realized that this was part of my life--it wasn't something that I was making up--and that it was something I wanted to write about." In 1978, the author enrolled in an M.A. program at Johns Hopkins University, where she wrote poems and stories incorporating her heritage, many of which would later become part of her books. She also began sending her work to publishers, most of whom sent back rejection slips.

After receiving her master's degree, Erdrich returned to Dartmouth as a writer-in-residence. Dorris--with whom she had remained in touch--attended a reading of Erdrich's poetry there and was impressed. A writer himself--Dorris would later publish the best-selling novel *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* and receive the 1989 National Book Critics Circle Award for his nonfiction work *The Broken Cord: A Family's Ongoing Struggle with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome*--he decided then that he was interested in working with Erdrich and getting to know her better. When he left for New Zealand to do field research and Erdrich went to Boston to work on a textbook, the two began sending their poetry and fiction back and forth with their letters, laying a groundwork for a literary relationship. Dorris returned to New Hampshire in 1980, and Erdrich moved back there as well. The two began collaborating on short stories, including one titled "The World's Greatest Fisherman." When this story won five thousand dollars in the Nelson Algren fiction competition, Erdrich and Dorris decided to expand it into a novel--*Love Medicine*. At the same time, their literary relationship led to a romantic one and in 1981 they were married.

The titles Erdrich and Dorris chose for their novels--such as *Love Medicine* and *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*--tend to be rich poetic or visual images, and was often the initial inspiration from which their novels were drawn. Erdrich told Schumacher, "I think a title is like a magnet: It begins to draw these scraps of experience or conversation or memory to it. Eventually, it collects a book." Erdrich and Dorris's collaborative process began with a first draft, usually written by whomever had the original idea for the book, the one who would ultimately be considered the official author. After the draft was written, the other person edited it, and then another draft was written; often five or six drafts would be written in all. Finally, the two read the work aloud until they agreed on each word. Although the author had the original voice and the final say, ultimately, both collaborators were responsible for what the work became. This "unique collaborative relationship," according to Alice Joyce in *Booklist*, is covered in *Conversations with Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris*, a collection of twenty-five interviews with the couple. By 1997, when Dorris committed suicide, the pair had separated and were no longer actively collaborating. Erdrich alone is responsible for much of her work in the 1990s and all of her publications since the turn of the twenty-first century.

Erdrich's novels *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen*, *Tracks*, *The Bingo Palace*, and *Tales of Burning Love* encompass the stories of three interrelated families living in and around a reservation in the fictional town of Argus, North Dakota, from 1912 through the 1980s. The novels have been compared to those of

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William Faulkner, mainly due to the multi-voice narration and non-chronological storytelling which he employed in works such as *As I Lay Dying*. Erdrich's works, linked by recurring characters who are victims of fate and the patterns set by their elders, are structured like intricate puzzles in which bits of information about individuals and their relations to one another are slowly released in a seemingly random order, until three-dimensional characters--with a future and a past--are revealed. Through her characters' antics, Erdrich explores universal family life cycles while also communicating a sense of the changes and loss involved in the twentieth-century Native-American experience.

Poet Robert Bly, describing Erdrich's nonlinear storytelling approach in the *New York Times Book Review*, emphasized her tendency to "choose a few minutes or a day in 1932, let one character talk, let another talk, and a third, then leap to 1941 and then to 1950 or 1964." The novels' circular format is a reflection of the way in which the works are constructed. Although Erdrich is dealing with a specific and extensive time period, "The writing doesn't start out and proceed chronologically. It never seems to start in the beginning. Rather, it's as though we're building something around a center, but that center can be anywhere."

Erdrich published her first novel, *Love Medicine*, in 1984. "With this impressive debut," stated *New York Times Book Review* contributor Marco Portales, "Louise Erdrich enters the company of America's better novelists." *Love Medicine* was named for the belief in love potions which is a part of Chippewa folklore. The novel explores the bonds of family and faith which preserve both the Chippewa tribal community and the individuals that comprise it.

The story begins at a family gathering following the death of June Kashpaw, a prostitute. The characters introduce one another, sharing stories about June which reveal their family history and their cultural beliefs. Albertine Johnson, June's niece, introduces her grandmother, Marie, her grandfather, Nector, and Nector's twin brother, Eli. Eli represents the old way--the Native American who never integrated into the white culture. He also plays a major role in *Tracks*, in which he appears as a young man. The story of Marie and Nector brings together many of the important images in the novel, including the notion of "love medicine." As a teenager in a convent, Marie is nearly burned to death by a nun who, in an attempt to exorcise the devil from within her, pours boiling water on Marie. Immediately following this incident, Marie is sexually assaulted by Nector. Marie and Nector are later married, but in middle age, Nector begins an affair with Lulu Lamartine, a married woman. In an attempt to rekindle Nector and Marie's passion, their grandson Lipsha prepares "love medicine" for Nector. But Lipsha has difficulty obtaining a wild goose heart for the potion. He substitutes a frozen turkey heart, which causes Nector to choke to death.

Reviewers responded positively to Erdrich's debut novel, citing its lyrical qualities as well as the rich characters who inhabit it. *New York Times* contributor D. J. R. Bruckner was impressed with Erdrich's "mastery of words," as well as the "vividly drawn" characters who "will not leave the mind once they are let in." Portales, who called *Love Medicine* "an engrossing book," applauded the unique narration technique which produces what he termed "a wondrous prose song." The novel won numerous awards, including the National Book Critics Circle Award for best work of fiction in 1984.

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After the publication of *Love Medicine*, Erdrich told reviewers that her next novel would focus less exclusively on her mother's side, embracing the author's mixed heritage and the mixed community in which she grew up. Her 1986 novel, *The Beet Queen*, deals with whites and half-breeds, as well as American Indians, and explores the interactions between these worlds. The story begins in 1932, during the Depression. Mary and Karl Adare's recently-widowed mother flies off with a carnival pilot, abandoning the two children and their newborn brother. The baby is taken by a young couple who have just lost their child. Karl and eleven-year-old Mary ride a freight train to Argus, seeking refuge with their aunt and uncle. When they arrive in the town, however, Karl, frightened by a dog, runs back onto the train and winds up at an orphanage. Mary grows up with her aunt and uncle, and the novel follows her life--as well as those of her jealous, self-centered cousin Sita and their part-Chippewa friend Celestine James--for the next forty years, tracing the themes of separation and loss that began with Mary's father's death and her mother's grand departure.

The Beet Queen was well received by critics, some of whom found it even more impressive than *Love Medicine*. Many commented favorably on the novel's poetic language and symbolism; Bly noted that Erdrich's "genius is in metaphor," and that the characters "show a convincing ability to feel an image with their whole bodies." Josh Rubins, writing in *New York Review of Books*, called *The Beet Queen* "a rare second novel, one that makes it seem as if the first, impressive as it was, promised too little, not too much." Other reviewers had problems with *The Beet Queen*, but they tended to dismiss the novel's flaws in light of its positive qualities. *New Republic* contributor Dorothy Wickenden considered the characters unrealistic and the ending contrived, but she lauded *The Beet Queen's* "ringing clarity and lyricism," as well as the "assured, polished quality" which she felt was missing in *Love Medicine*. Although Michiko Kakutani found the ending artificial, the *New York Times* reviewer called Erdrich "an immensely gifted young writer." "Even with its weaknesses," proclaimed Linda Simon in *Commonweal*, "The Beet Queen stands as a product of enormous talent."

After Erdrich completed *The Beet Queen*, she was uncertain as to what her next project should be. The four-hundred-page manuscript that would eventually become *Tracks* had remained untouched for ten years; the author referred to it as her "burden." She and Dorris took a fresh look at it, and decided that they could relate it to *Love Medicine* and *The Beet Queen*. While more political than her previous novels, *Tracks* also deals with spiritual themes, exploring the tension between the Native Americans' ancient beliefs and the Christian notions of the Europeans. *Tracks* takes place between 1912 and 1924, before the settings of Erdrich's other novels, and reveals the roots of *Love Medicine's* characters and their hardships. One of the narrators, Nanapush, is the leader of a tribe that is suffering on account of the white government's exploitation. He feels pressured to give up tribal land in order to avoid starvation. While Nanapush represents the old way, Pauline, the other narrator, represents change. The future mother of *Love Medicine's* Marie Lazarre, Pauline is a young half-breed from a mixed-blood tribe "for which the name was lost." She feels torn between her Indian faith and the white people's religion, and is considering leaving the reservation. But at the center of *Tracks* is Fleur, a character whom *Los Angeles Times Book Review* contributor Terry Tempest Williams called "one of the most haunting presences in contemporary American literature." Nanapush discovers this young woman--the last survivor of a family killed by consumption--in a cabin in the woods, starving and mad. Nanapush adopts Fleur and nurses her

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back to health.

Reviewers found *Tracks* distinctly different from Erdrich's earlier novels, and some felt that her third novel lacked the characteristics that made *Love Medicine* and *The Beet Queen* so outstanding. Washington Post Book World critic Jonathan Yardley stated that, on account of its more political focus, the work has a "labored quality." Robert Towers, in the *New York Review of Books*, found the characters too melodramatic and the tone too intense. Katherine Dieckmann, writing in the *Village Voice Literary Supplement*, affirmed that she "missed [Erdrich's] skilled multiplications of voice," and called the relationship between Pauline and Nanapush "symptomatic of the overall lack of grand orchestration and perspectival interplay that made Erdrich's first two novels polyphonic masterpieces." According to *Commonweal* contributor Christopher Vecsey, however, although "a reviewer might find some of the prose overwrought, and the two narrative voices indistinguishable ... readers will appreciate and applaud the vigor and inventiveness of the author."

Other reviewers enjoyed *Tracks* even more than the earlier novels. Williams stated that Erdrich's writing "has never appeared more polished and grounded," and added, "*Tracks* may be the story of our time." Thomas M. Disch lauded the novel's plot, with its surprising twists and turns, in the *Chicago Tribune*. The critic added: "Erdrich is like one of those rumored drugs that are instantly and forever addictive. Fortunately in her case you can just say yes."

Erdrich and Dorris's jointly authored novel *The Crown of Columbus* explores Native-American issues from the standpoint of the authors' current experience, rather than the world of their ancestors. Marking the quincentennial anniversary of Spanish explorer Christopher Columbus's voyage in a not-so-celebratory fashion, Erdrich and Dorris raise important questions about the meaning of that voyage for both Europeans and Native Americans today. The story is narrated by the two central characters, both Dartmouth professors involved in projects concerning Columbus. Vivian Twostar is a Native-American single mother with eclectic tastes and a teenage son, Nash. Vivian is asked to write an academic article on Columbus from a Native-American perspective and is researching Columbus's diaries. Roger Williams, a stuffy New England Protestant poet, is writing an epic work about the explorer's voyage. Vivian and Roger become lovers--parenting a girl named Violet--but have little in common. Ultimately acknowledging the destructive impact of Columbus's voyage on the Native-American people, Vivian and Roger vow to redress the political wrongs symbolically by changing the power structure in their relationship. In the end, as Vivian and Roger rediscover themselves, they rediscover America.

Some reviewers found *The Crown of Columbus* unbelievable and inconsistent, and considered it less praiseworthy than the individual authors' earlier works. However, *New York Times Book Review* contributor Robert Houston appreciated the work's timely political relevance. He also stated: "There are moments of genuine humor and compassion, of real insight and sound satire." Other critics also considered Vivian and Roger's adventures amusing, vibrant, and charming.

Erdrich returned to the descendants of Nanapush with her 1994 novel, *The Bingo Palace*. The fourth novel in the series that began with *Love Medicine*, *The Bingo Palace* weaves together a story of spiritual



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pursuit with elements of modern reservation life. Erdrich also provided continuity to the series by having the novel primarily narrated by Lipsha Morrissey, the illegitimate son of June Kapshaw and Gerry Nanapush from *Love Medicine*. After working at a Fargo sugar beet factory, Lipsha has returned home to the reservation in search of his life's meaning. He finds work at his uncle Lyman Lamartine's bingo parlor and love with his uncle's girlfriend, Shawnee Ray Toose. Thanks to the magic bingo tickets provided to him by the spirit of his dead mother, June, he also finds modest wealth. The character of Fleur Pillager returns from *Tracks* as Lipsha's great-grandmother. After visiting her, Lipsha embarks on a spiritual quest in order to impress Shawnee and learn more about his own tribal religious rites. Family members past and present are brought together in his pursuit, which comprises the final pages of the novel.

Reviewers' comments on *The Bingo Palace* were generally positive. While Lawrence Thornton, in the *New York Times Book Review*, found "some of the novel's later ventures into magic realism ... contrived," his overall impression was more positive: "Erdrich's sympathy for her characters shines as luminously as Shawnee Ray's jingle dress." Pam Houston, writing for the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, was especially taken by the character of Lipsha Morrissey, finding in him "what makes this her most exciting and satisfying book to date."

The Bingo Palace was also reviewed in the context of the series as a whole. Chicago Tribune contributor Michael Upchurch concluded, *The Bingo Palace* "falls somewhere between *Tracks* and *The Beet Queen* in its accomplishment." He added, "The best chapters in *The Bingo Palace* rival, as *Love Medicine* did, the work of Welty, Cheever, and Flannery O'Connor."

Erdrich turned to her own experience as mother of six for her next work, *The Blue Jay's Dance*. Her first book of nonfiction, *The Blue Jay's Dance* chronicles Erdrich's pregnancy and the birth year of her child. The title refers to a blue jay's habit of defiantly "dancing" towards an attacking hawk, Erdrich's metaphor for "the sort of controlled recklessness that having children always is," noted Jane Aspinall in *Quill & Quire*. Erdrich has been somewhat protective of her family's privacy and has stated the narrative actually describes a combination of her experience with several of her children. Sue Halpern, in the *New York Times Book Review*, remarked on this difficult balancing act between public and private lives but found "Erdrich's ambivalence inspires trust ... and suggests that she is the kind of mother whose story should be told."

Some reviewers noted that Erdrich's description of the maternal relationship was a powerful one: "the bond between mother and infant has rarely been captured so well," commented a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor. While the subject of pregnancy and motherhood is not a new one, Halpern noted that the book provided new insight into the topic: "What makes *The Blue Jay's Dance* worth reading is that it quietly places a mother's love and nurturance amid her love for the natural world and suggests ... how right that placement is." Although the *Kirkus Reviews* contributor found *The Blue Jay's Dance* to be "occasionally too self-conscious about the importance of Erdrich's role as Writer," others commented positively on the book's examination of the balance between the work of parenting and one's vocation. A *Los Angeles Times Book Review* reviewer remarked: "this book is really about working and having children, staying alert and ... focused through the first year of a child's life."



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Erdrich retained her focus on children with her first children's book, *Grandmother's Pigeon*. Published in 1996, it is a fanciful tale of an adventurous grandmother who heads to Greenland on the back of a porpoise, leaving behind grandchildren and three bird's eggs in her cluttered bedroom. The eggs hatch into passenger pigeons, thought to be extinct, through which the children are able to send messages to their missing grandmother. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer commented, "As in her fiction for adults ... , Erdrich makes every word count in her bewitching debut children's story."

Within the same year, Erdrich returned to the character of June Kasphaw of *Love Medicine* in her sixth novel, *Tales of Burning Love*. More accurately, it is the story of June's husband, Jack Mauser, and his five--including June--ex-wives. To begin the tale, Jack meets June while they are both inebriated and marries her that night. In reaction to his inability to consummate their marriage, she walks off into a blizzard and is found dead the next day. His four subsequent marriages share the same elements of tragedy and comedy, culminating in Jack's death in a fire in the house he built. The story of each marriage is told by the four ex-wives as they are stranded together in Jack's car during a blizzard after his funeral. Again, Erdrich references her previous work in the characters of Gerry and Dot Nanapush, Dot as one of Jack's ex-wives and Gerry as Dot's imprisoned husband.

Reviewers continued to note Erdrich's masterful descriptions and fine dialogue in this work. According to Penelope Mesic in the *Chicago Tribune*, "Erdrich's strength is that she gives emotional states--as shifting and intangible, as indefinable as wind--a visible form in metaphor." A *Times Literary Supplement* contributor compared her to Tobias Wolff-- "[like him], she is ... particularly good at evoking American small-town life and the space that engulfs it"--as well as Raymond Carver, noting her dialogues to be "small exchanges that ... map out the barely navigable distance between what's heard, what's meant, and what's said."

Tales of Burning Love also focuses Erdrich's abilities (and perhaps Dorris's collaborative talents) on the relationship between men and women. As the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer continued, "Erdrich also shares Carver's clear and sophisticated view of the more fundamental distance between men and women, and how that, too, is negotiated." However, Mark Childress in the *New York Times Book Review* commented that while "Jack's wives are vivid and fully realized ... whenever [Jack's] out of sight, he doesn't seem as interesting as the women who loved him."

While Erdrich covers familiar territory in *Tales of Burning Love*, she seems, claim several critics, to be expanding her focus slightly. Roxana Robinson, in *Washington Post Book World*, remarked, "The landscape, instead of being somber and overcast ... is vividly illuminated by bolts of freewheeling lunacy: This is a mad Gothic comedy." Or as Verlyn Klinkenborg noted in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, "this book marks a shift in [Erdrich's] career, a shift that is suggested rather than fulfilled ... there is new country coming into [her] sight, and this novel is her first welcoming account of it."

The Antelope Wife was the first book Erdrich released following Dorris's suicide, and although the author disavowed any relationship between herself and her characters, the story does include a self-destructive husband who inadvertently kills his child in a botched suicide attempt. The episodic plot

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revolves around the history of Rozin, married to the suicidal Richard and in love with another man, and Richard's friends Klaus Shawano and Sweetheart Calico--the latter the "Antelope Wife" of the title. Intercut with the modern tale of these four are the stories of their ancestors, Native and European, who live out their lives and passions on the plains. Erdrich reveals how the Antelope Wife received her mystical powers and how a dog named Almost Soup cheats mortality. People reviewer V. R. Peterson called the novel "a captivating jigsaw puzzle of longing and loss."

New York Times Book Review correspondent Diana Postlethwaite suggested that the Native-American craft of beadwork serves as a metaphor for the linked narratives in *The Antelope Wife*. As Postlethwaite wrote: "Family--both immediate and ancestral--is a tensile bond that links the novel's characters, as much a hangman's noose as a lifeline." The critic concluded that reading *The Antelope Wife* "offers a ... rich taste of the bitter and the sweet." In a New York Times review Michiko Kakutani described *The Antelope Wife* as "one of [Erdrich's] most powerful and fully imagined novels yet." Kakutani added: "Erdrich has returned to doing what she does best: using multiple viewpoints and strange, surreal tales within tales to conjure up a family's legacy of love, duty and guilt, and to show us how that family's fortunes have both shifted--and endured--as its members have abandoned ancient Indian traditions for a modern fast-food existence.... As for Ms. Erdrich's own storytelling powers, they are on virtuosic display in this novel. She has given us a fiercely imagined tale of love and loss, a story that manages to transform tragedy into comic redemption, sorrow into heroic survival. She has given us a wonderfully sad, funny and affecting novel."

Erdrich has also embarked upon a series of novels for children based on lives of Native-American young people at the time of white encroachment. *The Birchbark House*, published in 1999, tells the story of seven-year-old Omakayas, who lives with her extended family on an island in Lake Superior. In rich detail, Erdrich describes Omakayas's hardships and triumphs as she learns the lessons of her heritage and completes the routines of daily living. Heartache comes too, as Omakayas fails to nurse her beloved baby brother back to health when he contracts smallpox. Booklist contributor Hazel Rochman found the characters in *The Birchbark House* "wonderfully individualized, humane and funny," adding that readers of the "Little House" series by Laura Ingalls Wilder "will discover a new world, a different version of a story they thought they knew."

A peripheral character from Erdrich's previous novels, *Father Damien*, takes center stage in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. Having served the parishioners of a North Dakota Indian reservation for eight decades, Father Damien is finally dying--and is revealed to be a woman named Agnes DeWitt who was once ousted from a convent for playing Chopin piano pieces in the nude. Agnes's passion finds an outlet amongst the families of the reservation, whose names and deeds are already familiar from other Erdrich novels. What this story provides is a stage upon which the author can address the collaboration between Native beliefs and Catholicism. "This is the miracle of Erdrich's writing," stated Ann-Janine Morey in the *Christian Century*. "She conveys the fluidity of meanings across religious systems and across time through her full, rich characters." Elizabeth Blair likewise noted: "In this tale of passion and compassion, a priest meets an elder possessing love medicine and under his tutelage constructs a hybrid religious life that abounds with mysteries and miracles."

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Again the reviewers found much to praise in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. Kakutani found the portrait of Father Damien "so moving, so precisely observed." The critic further commented: "By turns comical and elegiac, farcical and tragic, the stories span the history of this Ojibwe tribe and its members' wrestlings with time and change and loss.... Erdrich has woven an imperfect but deeply affecting narrative and in doing so filled out the history of that postage-stamp-size world in Ojibwe country that she has delineated with such fervor and fidelity in half a dozen novels." New York Times Book Review contributor Verlyn Klinkenborg maintained that in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* Erdrich "takes us farther back in time than she ever has, so far back that she comes, in a sense, to the edge of the reservation that has been her fictional world. What makes it possible is the Ojibwa language, which is both as fresh and as ancient as rain. It is the leading edge of a discovery that will, one hopes, take Erdrich even farther." In the *New Leader* Lynne Sharon Schwartz declared: "The Last Report ... comes from the 'dictates of a great love,' the author's for her land and her people. Love alone never produced a fine novel, but Erdrich's gifts are abundant enough to subsume melodrama and quash disbelief. She has made this improbable saga moving and luminous."

Although Erdrich continues to dedicate herself to her saga involving Native-American characters, she steps away from that world to touch on her German-American heritage with *The Master Butcher's Singing Club*, the 2003 novel that made her a National Book Award finalist for the second time. The title is indicative of the inventive plot that does indeed include singing and intertwines the lives of a German World War I veteran and his wife with those of circus performers and other small-town residents. Erdrich's fans will find themselves in familiar territory, as this story is set in North Dakota like previous Erdrich novels; however this time there are few Native-American characters. The book was highly praised, a Booklist contributor commenting that, "Combining a cast of remarkable characters, a compelling plot, and an unforgiving North Dakota setting, Erdrich tells the story of indefatigable Fidelis Waldgovel, a butcher with a talent for singing."

With *Four Souls*, released in 2004, Erdrich picks up the thread of previous tales by returning to the story of Fleur Pillager from *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. Fleur wants revenge and her target is the man who swindled her out of her land, but this revenge not only takes its toll on the intended, but on Fleur as well. Critical reaction to *Four Souls* was mixed; the common complaint was Erdrich's lyrical style. The verdict from a *People* contributor was that while, "On occasion Erdrich's lyrical descriptions of Ojibwe beliefs run on and overwhelm the story," the author nonetheless "sustains a literary voice like no other." Noting the author's growing body of long fiction, in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Peter G. Beidler ranked Erdrich among "the most important contemporary Native American writers," and maintained that "her novels, particularly, deserve to be read, discussed, and appreciated."

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born June 7 (one source says July 6), 1954, in Little Falls, MN; daughter of Ralph Louis (a teacher with the Bureau of Indian Affairs) and Rita Joanne (affiliated with the Bureau of Indian Affairs; maiden name, Gourneau) Erdrich; married Michael Anthony Dorris (a writer and professor of Native-American studies), October 10, 1981 (died, April 11, 1997); children: Reynold Abel (died, 1991), Jeffrey Sava, Madeline Hannah, Persia Andromeda, Pallas Antigone, Aza Marion. Education: Dartmouth College, B.A., 1976; Johns

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Hopkins University, M.A., 1979. Politics: Democrat. Religion: "Anti-religion." Avocational Interests: Quilting, running, drawing, "playing chess with daughters and losing, playing piano badly, speaking terrible French." Memberships: International Writers, PEN (member of executive board, 1985- 88), Authors Guild, Authors League of America. Addresses: Agent: Andrew Wylie Agency, 250 West 57th St., Suite 2114, New York, NY 10107-2199.

AWARDS

Johns Hopkins University teaching fellow, 1978; MacDowell Colony fellow, 1980; Yaddo Colony fellow, 1981; Dartmouth College visiting fellow, 1981; First Prize, Nelson Algren fiction competition, 1982, for "The World's Greatest Fisherman"; National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, 1982; Pushcart Prize, 1983; National Magazine Fiction awards, 1983 and 1987; Virginia McCormack Scully Prize for best book of the year dealing with Indians or Chicanos, National Book Critics Circle Award for best work of fiction, and Los Angeles Times Award for best novel, all 1984, and Sue Kaufman Prize for Best First Novel, American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, American Book Award, Before Columbus Foundation, and named among best eleven books of 1985 by the New York Times Book Review, all for *Love Medicine*; Guggenheim fellow, 1985-86; *The Beet Queen* named one of Publishers Weekly's best books, 1986; First Prize, O. Henry awards, 1987; National Book Critics Circle Award nomination; World Fantasy Award for Best Novel, World Fantasy Convention, 1999, for *The Antelope Wife*; National Book Award for fiction finalist, 2001, for *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, and 2003, for *The Master Butchers Singing Club*; Scott O'Dell Award for historical fiction, 2006, for *The Game of Silence*.

CAREER

Writer. North Dakota State Arts Council, visiting poet and teacher, 1977-78; Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, writing instructor, 1978-79; Boston Indian Council, Boston, MA, communications director and editor of the *Circle*, 1979-80; Charles Merrill Co., textbook writer, 1980. Previously employed as a beet weeder in Wahpeton, ND; waitress in Wahpeton, Boston, MA, and Syracuse, NY; psychiatric aide in a Vermont hospital; poetry teacher at prisons; lifeguard; and construction flag signaler. Has judged writing contests.

WRITINGS

NOVELS

- *Love Medicine*, Holt (New York, NY), 1984, expanded edition, 1993.
- *The Beet Queen*, Holt (New York, NY), 1986.
- *Tracks*, Harper (New York, NY), 1988.*
- (With husband, Michael Dorris) *The Crown of Columbus*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1991.
- *The Bingo Palace*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1994.
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