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## **Master Butchers Singing Club** by Louise Erdrich

Like Louise Erdrich, Sherman Alexie skillfully mixes cultures, time frames, and characters in his novels and stories. Alexie is also a wonderful storyteller, and he captures both the humor and the despair of life on the Spokane Indian reservation in Washington State. His characters lead lives of less than quiet desperation, and as in Erdrich's tales violence is sometimes the only release that they can find. A good starting point is Alexie's first novel, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, a set of linked stories that showcase Alexie's clear prose and clear-eyed vision of the difficulties of his characters' lives. This work was the inspiration for the movie *Smoke Signals*.

Another writer who eloquently writes about people on the margins of society is Richard Russo. Russo shares with Erdrich the ability to create believable characters with whom the reader feels a connection. It is this connection that draws the reader deeper and deeper into the story. Although his stories are somewhat more linear than Erdrich's, Russo links past actions to present situations, and shows that history does matter. Russo has an ear for the speech and feel of blue-collar workers, and like Erdrich, he captures a sense of the hard lives of people on the edges. Alcohol and despair are often at the root of the stories, but Russo also writes with hope, and in many of his stories there is a sense of possible redemption that one also finds in Erdrich's work. Russo's plots are complex and the stories are filled with interesting characters. Start with *Nobody's Fool*, which tells the story of an aging laborer whose life is plagued by bad luck; or is it his choices that are bad?

Annie Proulx is another writer who writes in lyrical prose about difficult lives. With its interconnected stories and its beautiful writing, Proulx's *Accordion Crimes* is probably a good suggestion for fans of Louise Erdrich. The novel tracks the lives of a variety of characters, each of whom comes into possession of an accordion, brought to the US first by an Italian immigrant. Proulx's characters are all outsiders, and it is this apartness that drives their lives. There is less humor here than in Erdrich, but the stories, while at times violent and often heartwrenching, are also compellingly told.

Although she is more known for her nonfiction writing, readers who are fond of Erdrich's skill at developing characters will be drawn to Annie Dillard's novel *The Living*. Like Erdrich, Dillard examines the intersection of Native American and European cultures, in this case during the pioneer period in the Pacific Northwest. Dillard is another writer who can depict unbearably sad events in a way that leaves the reader both breathless and wanting more. *The Living* tells the story of the settlement of the Puget Sound area through the lives of several families. The story features a wide cast of characters, and covers a lot of temporal ground as well. Like Erdrich, Dillard juggles her stories and keeps the reader's attention with her sharply defined portrayals and her clear writing. Dillard's nonfiction writing also contains a strong thread of spirituality which Erdrich's fans may find appealing.

Finally, readers who enjoy Erdrich for her focus on relationships and the variable nature of love should try Reynolds Price. Although Price's North Carolina and Virginia settings are a far remove from Erdrich's prairie, both authors write compellingly of the burning nature of love to drive people apart as well as to bring them together. Price is also a consummate storyteller, like many Southern novelists, and as you find in Erdrich, family is often at the center of Price's stories. Start with *The Surface of Earth*, in which Eva Kendall falls in love with her teacher and runs off with him, severing her ties to her family, and starting a chain of sorrow that pass through several generations. The story's twisting plot and wide range of characters will also appeal to Erdrich fans.



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