

Master Butchers Singing Club by Louise Erdrich

Booklist Review: /*Starred Review*/ Although death looms large in Erdrich's emotionally powerful, richly detailed new novel, it does so in a "world where butchers sing like angels." The indomitable Fidelis Waldvogel walks home from World War I and marries Eva, the pregnant widow of his best friend, who was killed in combat. Carrying a suitcase full of butcher knives, he immigrates to America and settles in Argus, North Dakota (a fictional town familiar from Erdrich's previous novels). Endlessly resourceful Delphine Watzka has attempted to put Argus and her childhood (devoted to ministering to her father, Roy, a hopeless alcoholic) behind her by joining the circus as a human table for a balancing act. Although she deeply loves her balancing partner, Cyprian, she senses a barrier between them that prevents them from truly connecting. Returning to Argus, she takes a job at Fidelis' butcher shop, where she makes a friend for life in the hardworking Eva, eventually nursing her through a death by cancer and finally finding the love of her life in Fidelis. Erdrich gives us one of her finest characters in the radiant Delphine, who is possessed of an immense generosity of spirit, while also creating a host of truly remarkable secondary characters: loyal Cyprian, mournful Roy, the eccentric ragpicker Step-and-a-Half. In mesmerizing prose, Erdrich meticulously re-creates the brutal work of the slaughterhouse and the lithe grace of the circus troupe and then counterpoints this physical world with transcendent moments of human connection. It's clear that Erdrich, one of our finest writers, is working at the very peak of her considerable powers.

(Reviewed December 1, 2002) -- Joanne Wilkinson

Publishers Weekly Review: /* Starred Review */ All of the virtues of Erdrich's best works—her lyrical precision, bleakly beautiful North Dakota settings, deft interweaving of characters and subplots, and haunting evocation of love and its attendant mysteries—are on full display in this superb novel. Drawing on her paternal German ancestry, Erdrich tells the story of Fidelis Waldvogel, a WWI sniper and master butcher with a "talent for stillness" and for singing. After marrying Eva, the pregnant fiancée of his best friend, who was killed in the war, he emigrates to America. Settling in Argus, N.Dak., he and Eva establish a butcher shop known for its Old World expertise and for housing Fidelis's beloved singing club. The focus then shifts to Delphine Watzka, a performer in a traveling vaudeville act, who has recently returned to Argus to care for her alcoholic father, Roy. Roy's health problems pale beside his legal problems: the predatory Sheriff Hock is investigating how the Chavers family came to perish in Roy's basement. Not willing to abandon Roy, Delphine and her vaudeville partner, Cyprian Lazzare, a homosexual Ojibwa, set up house in Argus, where Delphine soon befriends Eva and develops a disturbing attraction to Fidelis. Erdrich's plot spans 36 years, covering two world wars, several violent deaths, near-deaths, illnesses, accidents and crimes—"awful things occurring to other humans," but somehow not to Delphine, who draws on reserves of toughness and compassion to sustain herself as well as the surprisingly vulnerable Waldvogel family. Some readers may be disappointed by the trajectory of the Fidelis-Delphine love story, which is consummated without quite the fireworks display Erdrich seems to promise, but many others will be deeply moved by the complicated romance. With its lush prose, jolts of wisdom and historical sweep, this story is as rich and resonant as any Erdrich has told. BOMC alternate selection; 6-city author tour. (Feb. 7) — Staff (Reviewed December 23, 2002) (Publishers Weekly, vol 249, issue 51, p43)