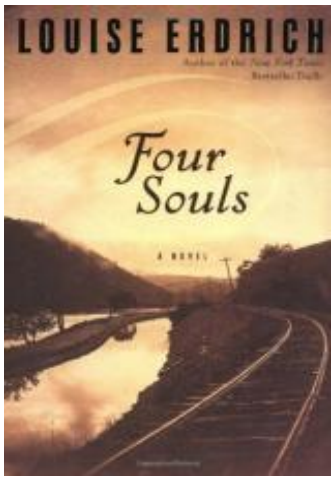
Four Souls

by Louise Erdrich



About the Book

Taking up where **Tracks** leaves off, in **Four Souls**, a strange and compelling woman decides to leave home, and the story begins. Fleur Pillager takes her mother's name, Four Souls, for strength and walks from her Ojibwe reservation to the cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul. She is seeking revenge on the lumber baron who has stripped her reservation. But revenge is never simple, and she quickly finds her intentions complicated by her own dangerous compassion for the man who wronged her.

The two narrators of **Four Souls** are from utterly different worlds. Nanapush is both Fleur's savior and her conscience. He tells Fleur's story and tells his own. When his childhood nemesis appears and casts his eye toward his wife, Margaret, Nanapush acts out an absurd revenge of his own and nearly ends up destroying everything. The other narrator, Polly Elizabeth Gheen, is a pretentious and vulnerable upper-crust fringe element, a hanger-on in a wealthy Minneapolis family, a woman aware of her precarious hold on those around her. To her own great surprise, the entrance of Fleur Pillager into her household and her life effects a transformation she could never have predicted. Both narrators come to a deeper understanding of themselves through their relationships with the elusive Fleur Pillager.

Discussion Guide

1. At the opening of **Four Souls**, where is Fleur Pillager and what trail is she following? What motivates her to leave her home? How is her home on the reservation connected to John James Mauser's elegant house in Minneapolis?

2. How would you describe Polly Elizabeth Gheen? What explains her presence at Mauser's house? How does she involve herself with his medical condition?

3. Discuss the myriad attitudes about human sexuality explored in **Four Souls** in the characters of John and Placide Mauser, Polly Gheen, Fleur Pillager, Nanapush, and Margaret Kashpaw. What is Karezza, and how does it spell doom

for the Mausers' marriage?

4. What has John Mauser done to incur Fleur Pillager's wrath? Why does she want him dead, and how does he manage to convert her hate into something else? Did anything in the development of their relationship surprise you?

5. When Nanapush says of Fleur, "There were times we hated who we were, and who we had to become, in order not to follow those we loved into the next world," what does he mean? What roles do ancestors play in **Four Souls**? How does the figure of **Four Souls** "live beneath the life" of Fleur Pillager?

6. How does Fleur's pregnancy alter her relationship with Polly Gheen?

7. Describe John James Mauser II. How does his father make sense of his son's condition? How does Fleur use it to her advantage?

8. How does Margaret Kashpaw's desire for linoleum upset the equilibrium of her relationship with Nanapush? How does Nanapush respond to Margaret's decision? Discuss the nature of their relationship. How do honesty and jealousy come into play?

9. What is the significance of Margaret's medicine dress in **Four Souls**? What is its intended use? What does Nanapush use it for? How does Margaret propose to use it to help Fleur?

10. Nanapush writes: "When I look at the scope and drift of our history, I see that we have come out of it with something, at least. This scrap of earth. This ishkonigan. This left over. We've got this and as long as we can hold on to it we will be some sort of people." What are some of the challenges faced by the Ojibwe people as a whole? Do you see the ending of **Four Souls** as hopeful? Tragic? Discuss possible interpretations of the ending of the novel.

Author Bio

Louise Erdrich, a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, is the award-winning author of many novels, as well as volumes of poetry, children?s books and a memoir of early motherhood. Erdrich lives in Minnesota with her daughters and is the owner of Birchbark Books, a small independent bookstore.

Critical Praise

"Trim, haunting, beautifully sketched...Four Souls stands alone as a trenchant rendering of the costs and causes of love, family, identity, memory and revenge."

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