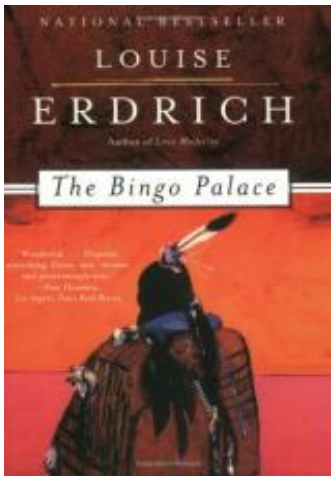
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The Bingo Palace

by Louise Erdrich



About the Book

> We never ask for all this heat and silence in the first place, it's true. This package deal. It's like a million-dollar worthless letter in the mail. You're chosen from nothingness, but you don't know for what. You open the confusing ad and you think, Shall I send it in or should I just let the possiblities ripen? You are set there in a basket, and one day you hear the knock and open the door and reach down and there is your life. *--Lipsha Morrissey in The Bingo Palace*

When Lulu Lamartine sends her grandson, the hapless, underachieving Lipsha Morrissey, a copy of a wanted notice for his father, Gerry Nanapush, he takes it as a summons to return home to the reservation. Morrissey, gifted with healing powers, has "shorted out his touch" by living in cities and making "himself stupid with his dope-pipe." Part of what pulls him back is the need to confront a part of his history from which he has never quite emerged: the fact that his mother tied him in a sack and threw him in a slough, where he would have drowned but for a chance rescue. Lipsha's search for himself becomes complicated almost the instant he arrives, when he falls in love with Shawnee Ray Toose, an ambitious woman who is "semi-engaged" to his half-uncle, Lyman Lamartine. Lyman is the reservation's most successful businessman, "a big, bland Velveeta" in Lipsha's view, but the "biggest cheese" around, who dreams about building a bingo palace on traditional land that is still owned by Fleur Pillager. The novel weaves together the fate of a culture--one trying to preserve its traditions, but needing to survive financially--with the story of Lipsha's personal quest for identity. It is through the rivalry with Lyman (who is also his guide and mentor) that Lipsha comes to understand the complexities of love, identity, success, and failure-- universals that we all must come to terms with, but that are shaded in particular ways for those who are descendants of Native American culture in the United States. As Lipsha, who has read the Greek classics, notes, "If you read about a thing like Lyman and me happening in those days, one or both of us would surely have to die. But us Indians, we're so used to inner plot twists that we just laugh."

Discussion Guide

1. The word "luck" appears frequently in the novel: it figures in the titles of nine chapters and is invoked as a way to explain why things happen the way they do. But the novel also makes cases for fate (in forces outside of the everyday) and for design (for instance, Lipsha discovers that his "luck" in bingo is really Lyman's scheme to siphon money back to himself). In what ways does the novel explore questions of chance, fate, and will? What does luck seem to mean in the different chapters featuring it? How do specific characters (such as Lipsha, Lyman, Shawnee Ray, Zelda) exemplify the intricacies of fortune, the pressures of the past, and the problems of constructing a life for oneself? How are Juno's ghost and Fleur used to extend conventional ideas about the nature of fate and reality?

2. Critics have occasionally noted that the men and women in Erdrich's novels seem to live in entirely separate worlds. Do you feel this observation applies to The Bingo Palace ? How would you describe the separate worlds of the men and women? Does the novel offer any real points of intersection between the two?

3. Why are Lipsha and Lyman so different? Are there events in their pasts that caused them to be so different? How and why does Lipsha change? What does he come to understand about himself? Lyman? Shanwee Ray? his parents? Do you think that the novel is a cautionary tale about the dangers of trying to go home again, or a story about the value and necessity of returning to one's home?

4. One motif of Native American literature is the vision quest. How is this used in The Bingo Palace? What kinds of quests occupy specific characters (especially Lipsha, Lyman, Shawnee Ray)? Do you think the novel demonstrates that spiritual and material quests are necessarily opposed? How do you feel about this--do you feel an inherent conflict between spiritual and material goals and desires?

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

" Louise Erdrich's books all have a stoic wisdom, an unwillingness to judge, a committment to objective observation that records each emotional event entirely without ever sacrificing complexity of meaning....but....in [Lipsha Morrissey], Erdrich has allowed the wisdom to get mixed up with a passion, a fire, a love, that is anything but stoic. "

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