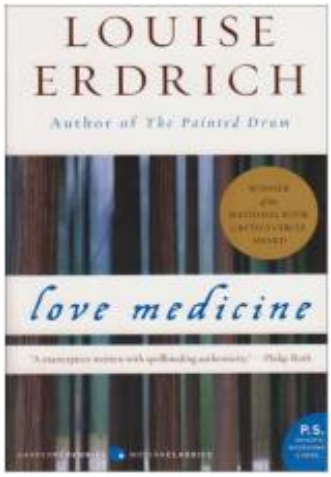
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Love Medicine

by Louise Erdrich



About the Book

But when she mentions them love medicines, I feel my back prickle at the danger. These love medicines is something of an old Chippewa specialty. No other tribe has got them down so well. But love medicines is not for the laymen to handle. You don't just go out and get one without paying for it. Before you get one, even, you should go through one hell of a lot of mental condensation. You got to think it over. Choose the right one. You could really mess up your life grinding up the wrong little thing. --*Lipsha Morrissey in Love Medicine*

In this powerful first novel, Louise Erdrich introduces several generations in the interrelated families living in and around a Chippewa or Ojibwa reservation near the fictional town of Argus, North Dakota. The lives of these characters will unfold further in **The Beet Queen**, **Tracks**, and **The Bingo Palace**. Spanning fifty years, from 1934 through 1984, the novel is told through the voices of a series of vivid characters, mostly Chippewa men and women who are caught up in the emotional tangle of their families' histories, but who struggle to gain some control over their lives. Sometimes compared to Faulkner's multinarrated family sagas, **Love Medicine** creates an intense vision of a world that is at once violent and tender, ugly and lyrical, realistic and gothic. At their best, the separate stories that make up the novel convey the subtle pressures upon the souls of people who are culturally mixed-- of those whose lives are shaped by both Native American and non-Indian values, habits, and customs. The novel begins at a family gathering following the death of June Kashpaw, frozen to death in a snowstorm on Easter Sunday, 1981. Relatives exchange stories about June, piecing together the fragments of memories that are the stuff of family histories. By storytelling and recollection, Erdrich resurrects lives throughout the novel: the sensual Lulu Lamartine, whose children have different fathers, but whose passionate tie to her first love, Nector Kashpaw, intensifies over the years; Nector Kashpaw, who recalls his first encounter with his future wife, Marie Lazarre, and then unfolds the history of his obsession with Lulu. We also hear the younger generation: the philosophical Lipsha Morrissey, June's abandoned son, who makes a Chippewa love medicine to keep his grandparents together; the Lamartine boys, the "lucky" one, Lyman, whose ambition is to build a bingo palace, and the "unlucky" Henry, who returns from three years in Vietnam a restless, tortured soul; and the ambitious Albertine Johnson, studying Western medicine and living far away, off-reservation.

Discussion Guide

1. The novel deals extensively with the love-hate relationships between family members. What are some of the different kinds of familial bonds, positive and negative? What themes are explored through these relationships? What does this novel suggest about the nature of families?

2. One theme of the novel is the unavoidable impact of the non-Indian world (for instance, Catholicism, alcohol, intermarriages, the Vietnam War, capitalism, the legal system) on the Chippewa. How does the interaction with outsiders affect specific characters? What does the novel suggest about the difficulties and consequences of dealing with a mixed world?

3. Why do you think Erdrich chose to write her novel in the way she did, using time leaps and a series of different narrators to recount their own tales? What do you think is gained by this form of narrative? How might the form's emphasis on individual storytelling relate to the novel's larger themes?

4. Why do you think the section "Love Medicine" was chosen as the title story of the novel? Would you have chosen another section on the basis of a strength or unifying theme?

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

"Love Medicine is finally about the enduring verities of loving and surviving, and these truths are revealed in a narrative that is an invigorating mixture of the comic and the tragic.... Each word, each sentence seems perfectly placed to achieve her desired effect. "

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