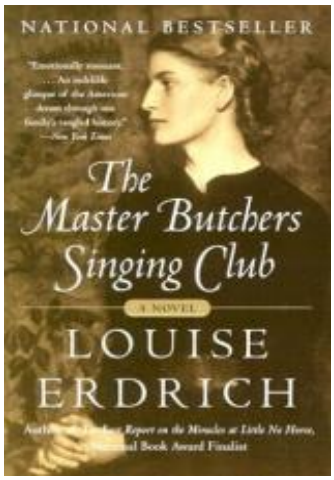
The Master Butchers Singing Club

by Louise Erdrich



About the Book

While set, like much of Erdrich's work, in her native North Dakota, **The Master Butchers Singing Club** is largely centered around the European-Americans who settled the desolate plains, rather than the reservation-dwelling Native Americans about whom she often writes. Bracketed by the two world wars, Erdrich's multi-generational, character-rich story chronicles a group of ordinary small-town denizens as they encounter the extraordinary events--both in their insular world and in the larger world, too--that come to define their lives.

Having seen his best friend slaughtered in the trenches of World War I, Fidelis Waldvogel trudges back to Germany, his first mission to tell the dead man's fiancée the devastating news. When he arrives at Eva Kalb's house, Fidelis discovers that she is pregnant and, feeling almost as if he has become some part of the friend who died on the battlefield, he offers to marry her. With Eva, he begins to push back the horrific memories of what he has seen and done in the war and learns that he is meant to love.

Fleeing post-war poverty, Fidelis emigrates to America, his sights set on Seattle. A butcher by trade, the new immigrant is armed with a suitcase bearing only knives and a generous supply of sausages that he plans to sell to pay his fare. The sausages take him only as far as Argus, North Dakota, an unassuming town on the plains. Eva and her son, Franz, soon join him, and through relentless hard work, the Waldvogels establish a toehold in their new land. Fidelis, who sings like an angel, even starts a singing club among the men of the town. Eva gives birth to three more sons--Markus, and the twins Emil and Erich.

At about the same time, Delphine Watzka arrives back in Argus after touring the Midwest with Cyprian Lazarre as a sideshow performer. Though Cyprian loves Delphine, he is homosexual, and the two have settled into a complicated, uneasy domesticity. Delphine has been hesitant to return to Argus, where she long ago abandoned her drunken father, Roy. But when she and Cyprian get there, they make a horrible discovery that will tie them to the place. Beneath the floorboards of her father's house are the fetid, rotting corpses of a family that disappeared years before. Roy, it seems,

has been too drunk even to realize the source of the horrible smell. Delphine all but burns down the house in an effort to purge it of its odor, but the question persists: who is responsible for the family's death?

Most persistent in finding the answer is the sheriff, Albert Hock. Intoxicated by his own sense of importance, Hock uses his power of intimidation to try to insinuate himself into the romantic good graces of Delphine's friend Clarisse. But Clarisse, who is the local undertaker, will have nothing to do with the supercilious young man. When she later kills Hock while warding off his advance, Clarisse is forced to disappear from town, leaving the already solitary Delphine even more on her own.

Delphine begins to work at the butcher shop and she becomes fast friends with Eva. As Eva painfully succumbs to cancer, Delphine nurses her with vehement tenderness. She locks horns with Fidelis's jealous sister, Tante, who, with Teutonic arrogance, withholds Eva's morphine. Surprisingly, it is Roy who rallies from his perpetual drunkenness to steal some of the drug for the dying woman. Eva's death proves a catalyst that temporarily cures Roy of his alcoholism. It also precipitates major changes in Delphine's life, as she has promised to take care of Eva's boys, and implicitly vows to take care of Fidelis as well.

Carrying out this trust will further pit Delphine against Tante, who has her own designs for the family. Markus, the most like Eva and Delphine's favorite, flees the home behind the butcher shop and moves in with Delphine and Cyprian. Markus has been scarred by the death of the girl he loved, one of those found beneath the floorboards of Roy's house. Franz, Eva's eldest son, spurns the love of Mazarine Shimek, a dirt poor local girl he has loved since childhood. As the 1930's wane, Tante convinces Fidelis that she should take the twins back to Germany. Delphine fights this decision, but only through the intervention of fate will she prevent Markus from the going on the journey. With Tante gone, and Cyprian having hit the road once more as a sideshow performer, Fidelis and Delphine are freed at last to consummate their long-simmering passion, and they marry.

As America becomes involved in World War II, Franz's love of piloting airplanes leads naturally to his enlistment in the Air Corps. Markus also enlists. Across the Atlantic, Erich and Emil are conscripted into the German army and the singing butcher, still haunted by his own time in the trenches, watches helplessly as his sons don opposing uniforms in another senseless war.

On the periphery of the drama, an old woman called Step-and-a-Half scours the back alleys of Argus for scrap iron and discards. Her own past, steeped in violence and despair, is a mystery to the townspeople. But she alone knows one secret--the truth about Delphine's origins that brings the novel to a startling and dazzling close.

Discussion Guide

1. "Ever since he was a child, when sorrow had come down upon him, he'd breathed lightly and gone motionless. As a young soldier, he'd known from the first that in his talent for stillness lay the key to his survival." (p. 2) What clues does this passage give us about Fidelis's personality and his means of coping with tragedy later in life?

2. Erdrich offers glimpses of both Fidelis's and Cyprian's experiences of war. How are they similar and different? What role did war play in developing each man's personality?

3. Erdrich explores different kinds of strength in her novel, most significantly Fidelis's rigidity and Cyprian's ability to balance. How do the novel's themes draw on the differences between these two men's physical prowess?

4. In her vaudeville act with Cyprian, Delphine becomes a "table," supporting Cyprian and a number of pieces of furniture on her torso. What is the significance of Delphine's role as a table? How does her strength impact the lives of those around her?

5. Each of the main characters in the novel possesses a particular kind of power that both identifies them and helps them through difficult times. What are the various kinds of power Erdrich writes about? Is one kind better than another? What kinds of power do you possess?

6. Fidelis and Eva redistribute the byproducts of their butchering throughout the town: to people, to animals, and to the ground. How is the theme of recycling scraps of life carried through? Who continues this cycle of recovering discarded objects?

7. Fidelis's son, Marcus, narrowly escapes death when he is buried alive in a mound of dirt. What does this event tell you about Marcus, his father, and Cyprian? Who--and what--else is buried in this novel? What is Erdrich saying about earth, about death, and about life in this scene?

8. How does Erdrich make use of the novel's setting? How does North Dakota's climate, history, and terrain impact the lives of Argus's citizens?

9. Before she dies, Eva takes a plane flight over Argus with her son, Franz. During the flight, she has a revelation: *"We are spots. Spots in the spot. No matter. We specks are flying on our own power. We are not blown up there by wind!" (p. 118) She goes on to say, "Death is only part of things bigger than we can imagine. Our brains are just starting the greatness, to learn how to do things like flying. What next? You will see, and you will see that your mother is of the design. And I will always be made of things, and things will always be made of me. Nothing can get rid of me because I am included into the pattern."* How do these passages relate to Erdrich's themes of interconnection, power, and heritage? How might Eva's revelations run counter to the beliefs of her family and neighbors? How do they correspond to your own religious beliefs, or your philosophy of life? (119)

10. On Roy's deathbed he confesses his part in the deaths of the Chavers family. Is it significant that he was angry with Porky Chavers for "singing over him?" If Delphine had known the truth when she first returned to Argus, what do you think she would have done? Why does learning the story make Delphine want to run away? Who, in the end, was responsible for these deaths?

11. Does learning the truth about Delphine's parentage alter your impressions of her? Do you agree with Step-and-a-Half's decision not to tell her? How do you think Delphine would react to hearing the facts about her birth?

12. "Who are you is a question with a long answer or a short answer," Delphine thinks when responding to Fidelis's sister's inquiry. How would you answer the question about Delphine or Fidelis or any of the other characters? How, if at all, has the book made you think differently about asking or answering that question?

13. Why does Erdrich title the book **The Master Butchers Singing Club**?

14. Why does Erdrich end the novel with Step-and-a-Half's story?

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

"A thoughtful, artful, painfully moving addition to an ongoing American saga .. unimaginably rich."

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