

An Instructor's Guide to *Love Medicine* by Louise Erdrich

Note to Teachers

Themes: Native American life, family relationships, bi-culturalism, oral tradition

In this powerful novel, the first of her Native American series, Louise Erdrich introduces several generations in the interrelated families living in and around a Chippewa or Ojibwa reservation in North Dakota. Spanning fifty years, from 1934 to 1984, *Love Medicine* 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. In her uniquely poetic style, Erdrich creates an intense vision of a world that is at once violent and tender, ugly and lyrical, realistic and gothic. The separate stories that make up the novel convey the subtle pressure 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.

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 paints a dazzling series of family portraits: the sensual Lulu Lamertine, whose children have different fathers, but whose passionate tie to her first love, Nestor Kashpay, intensifies over the years; 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.

Louise Erdrich continued this family saga in her novels *The Beet Queen*, *Tracks*, and *The Bingo Palace*. She has also written two collections of poetry, *Jacklight*, and *Baptism of Desire*.

Questions for Classroom Discussion

1. *Love Medicine* 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 example, 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 the author 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. Erdrich is a poet as well as a novelist. Do you find evidence of a poetic sensibility in this novel? How does this influence the novel's impact on you? Do you find some characters more poetically-voiced than others?
5. 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?