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Louise Erdrich Interview

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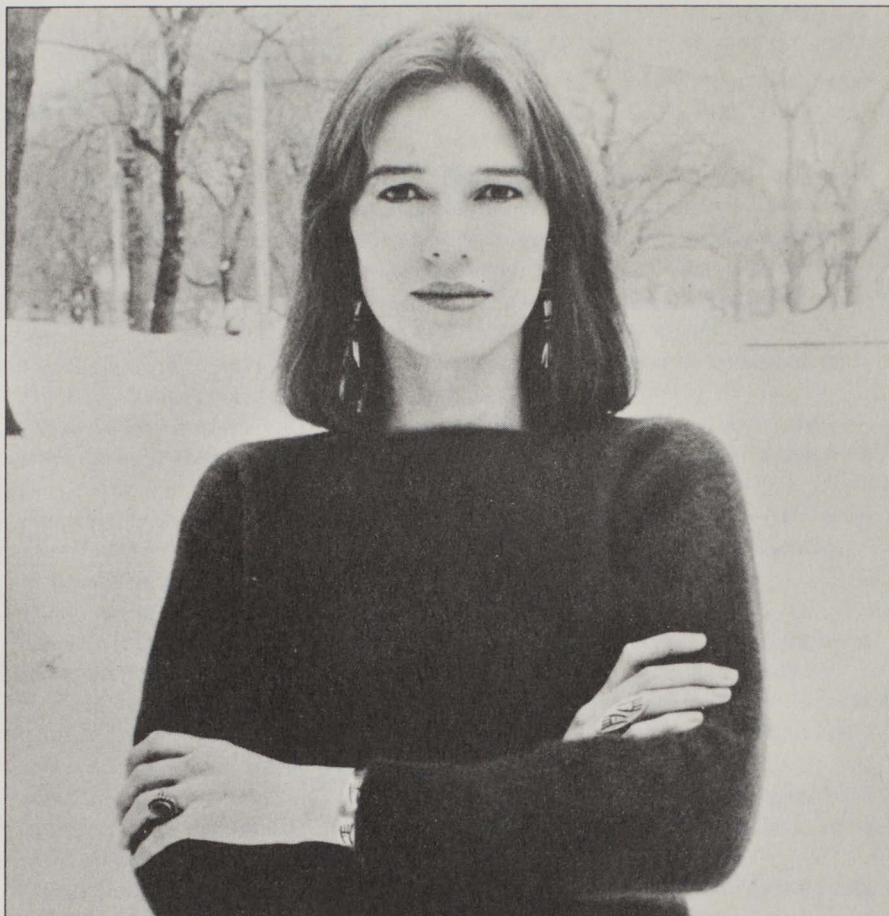
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Louise Erdrich, author of *The Beet Queen*, published by Henry Holt and Co., September 15, 1986/\$16.95. Credit: Jerry Bauer.

Words with Louise Erdrich: A CutBank Interview

Louise Erdrich is best-known as the author of *Love Medicine*, her stunning debut novel which managed the unusual feat of achieving both mass critical acclaim and bestseller status. Released in October of 1984, the book chronicles three generations of Kashpaws, Lamartines, and Lazarres, as these families live out their harsh lives on the bleak Dakota plains. But the greatness of *Love Medicine* is, as Phillip Roth put it, the way in which Erdrich “depicts the harshness of these lives with originality, authority, tenderness, and a wild and pitiless wit.” Jonathon Yardley, writing in the *Washington Post Book World*, was perhaps even more impressed, noting that Erdrich accomplishes all this “without once striking a false note,” further characterizing *Love Medicine* as the work of a “tough, loving mind.” Other reviewers proved equally enthusiastic, as the novel garnered praise from virtually every major critical journal before finally being selected as 1984’s best work of fiction by the National Book Critic’s Circle. But to dwell on the book’s critical appeal is to ignore its commercial success. *Love Medicine* became a national bestseller in early 1985, and the twelve foreign editions currently in print make this popularity a worldwide phenomenon. With such an auspicious debut as a novelist, it would, in most cases, be easy to overlook the author’s other talents, but Louise Erdrich’s achievements as poet, editor, textbook author, and critic demand notice.

Born of German/Chippewa descent, Erdrich attended Wahpeton (ND) Indian Boarding School, where both her parents taught, then went on to Dartmouth College. After graduate studies at Johns Hopkins University, she edited the Boston Indian Council newspaper, *The Circle*, and published *Imagination*, a textbook on creativity in children. Around this time, she began to publish her creative work, placing poems in literary journals and quarterlies, and publishing two stories in *Redbook* (under the pseudonyms of Hiede Louise and Milou North). Erdrich’s fiction and poetry appeared with increasing frequency throughout the late ’70s and early ’80s, when her short story, “The World’s Greatest Fisherman,” won the Nelson Algren Short Fiction Award in 1982. *Jacklight*, a collection of her poetry, appeared in January of 1984, and its excellence attests to the probability that had not *Love Medicine* seen publication later that same year, we would undoubtedly be more familiar with Louise Erdrich as the author of this fine volume of poems, so spare in language and imagery, yet long on narrative vitality and dramatic effect.

Still, in spite of her numerous achievements in other areas, Erdrich remains best-known as one of the most promising young novelists to emerge in many years. In the wake of *Love Medicine*, she has continued to publish regularly, contributing fiction to *Atlantic Monthly*, *Paris Review*, *Georgia Review*, and others. Additionally, her recent essay on the writer’s sense of place (“Where I Ought to Be,” *New York Times Book Review*, July 28, 1985) may well prove to be one of the most influential and inspiring pieces of criticism published in this decade.

Erdrich currently lives on a farm in New Hampshire with her husband and collaborator, Michael Dorris, and their children—Abel, Sava, Madeline, Persia, and Pallas. She came to Missoula in June of 1986 to read at the University of Montana, and was kind enough to talk with me, despite a busy schedule that allowed less than 24 hours in town, and despite the fact that it happened to be her birthday (June 7). This interview took place during the late afternoon of that day, in a third-story hotelroom overlooking Mt. Sentinel and the Clark Fork River, as Louise’s hair dripped dry from a hasty shower, and Michael busily quieted the children in the adjoining room.

Joseph Martin

When did you first know you were a writer? When did you first say "That's what I'm going to do with my life"?

Well, I started writing, keeping journals, anyway, when I was in high school. But I didn't plan on being a writer, or thinking of it as any kind of career or vocation, until my second year in college, when I found I could do nothing else in this world! [Laughs.] That's when I started writing seriously and kept it up, although at times I held various jobs that took up most of my energy, so I only wrote part-time. But I kept it up for about ten years. I wasn't published anywhere, really, for a long time. Just kept at it and kept hoping that something would happen. I was writing poems.

So you started as a poet . . .

Right. I started out writing poems, and didn't write fiction until . . . oh, five or six years ago. But I've been writing poems since about 1973.

Your book of poems, Jacklight, for all its excellence, is relatively unheard of. Do you feel it's been kind of "lost in the shuffle" due to all the acclaim for Love Medicine?

No, I think that just tends to happen with poetry. I think the situation is, for whatever reason, very different. There doesn't seem to be as wide an audience. I think that's wrong, and it's a pity, but that's what seems to have happened.

Was that one of the reasons you started writing fiction? To reach a wider audience?

No, actually I started writing fiction because, if you look at the poems in *Jacklight*, you'll see that they're by and large narrative poems. I just began to feel that they needed a broader form. I was telling stories, so I thought they might as well be stories. But once I started doing that, I couldn't go back to poetry.

And then the novel just took off . . .

It seems to have.

Did that surprise you?

Oh, yes! Both Michael and I. And I should say right here that we both work very closely together on all of our work. Michael's going to have a book out soon, called *Yellow Raft on Blue Water* [An excerpt from the novel is published in this issue on page 00.], and we both work together on everything. But we just started our collaboration in our editing, our whole literary relationship, with *Love Medicine*. I remember the last day, when we taped it up and mailed it off. We said it was the proverbial "feather dropping into the Grand Canyon." We didn't know what would happen, and we didn't really expect anything. However, Michael did enter it in all these different contests for prizes, and that's what began to gather attention for it, I think. That and the fact that people gave it to their friends. People bought extra copies, and that's what started the ball rolling in terms of the reprinting and all. It's an interesting kind of phenomenon, because it wasn't advertised or pushed or hyped as a hardcover book. People simply began to give it to other people, and I think that's quite beautiful.

A lot of word of mouth, then?

Yes.

It was the same way here, in the UM writing program, last year. Joy Harjo was here, teaching stories like "The Beet Queen" and "American Horse." Suddenly everyone was passing them around and talking about them. There was a lot of anticipation built up for the novel.

Well, that's wonderful. You know, "American Horse" actually goes into a fourth book. There are four books in, I guess, a "quartet," or whatever. A series of related books. *Love Medicine*, and then the next one is *The Beet Queen*, which has many related characters, and another one I'm working on with Michael that takes place before *Love Medicine*, called *Tracks*. And the last one is *American Horse*, which has many of the same characters, also.

When you first began working on Love Medicine, was it a novel from the very beginning, or a group of stories, or a part of a four-book sequence? You published several of the chapters as short stories . . .

Well, at first I had two stories. The first one was "The Red Convertible," and the second was "Scales." Then I started writing poetry again, trying to get poetry done and so on and so on. . . . Then, there was a contest. We were really short on cash, and it had a fat prize: \$5000. It was the Nelson Algren Award. So Michael and I came home from visiting his folks in January 1981, and Michael said "Do that story you've been thinking about, why don't you?" And I said "No, I've only got a couple of weeks till the deadline, I can't do it, I can't do it. . . ." But between the two of us, we arranged things. As you can see [*she gestures toward the adjoining room where Michael quiets the children as we speak*], we need to arrange things quite intricately in order to get any work done. We arranged things so that I could work at the kitchen table. So the story, "The World's Greatest Fisherman," was written practically straight out, from an idea that had been haunting me for a long time. After that, it was Michael who told me that this was really a novel, because these characters were really the same as these other characters, and that I should write the other pieces. So the rest of the book was written in chunks to fit into some kind of overall scheme, although it isn't a "finished" book, because *American Horse* finishes it. Some of the characters are left open-ended.

And the other books pick up with these characters?

Some of them do. *The Beet Queen*, for instance, is about Dot Adare, who is the woman in the weigh shack in *Love Medicine*. But it's about her and her little girl.

The one who knits "miniature suits of mail"?

Right. She's like that. Very belligerent.

What about Lipsha? Is he coming back?

I hope so. He's very close to my heart. But it's hard to write in that innocent-but-wise voice. I don't know if I'll be able to do it again, or if Michael and I will be able to come up with something.

I love it when he says things like "I was in a laundry," instead of "I was in a quandary."

Right! I'm glad you said that, because my editors told me nobody was going to get that, nobody would think that's funny. But I think his malapropisms are really funny. Like when he says "God smites the Phillipines," instead of "the Phillistines." But it seems kind of a totally unrelated voice in terms of my own life, so it's kind of hard to generate this other persona. I don't know if I'll ever get his character back again.

What about influences? Structurally, Love Medicine is very similar to Faulkner's As I Lay Dying, and you mention Faulkner very favorably in the "Where I Ought to Be" essay. Was he a big influence?

Oh yes. I read a lot of Faulkner. Also Toni Morrison. We listened to her all the way out here. She's written some of my favorite books. But Faulkner is definitely a big influence, along with Flannery O'Connor.

One thing I've noticed in your writing is that it often involves a lot of what might be called "power struggles," especially those between very powerful women. Do you see this as a recurrent theme?

Yes, I think so. Power struggles and reconciliations. And I'm certainly very conscious of it. In my relationship with women in my family, and with my women friends, I've noticed that they're often very powerful relationships, and often very unacknowledged, even by women, but very central.

In Love Medicine, there almost seems to be a shift from the opening chapters, where the women characters are very much in charge, and the later chapters, where the men begin to assert control. Was this purposeful, a symbolic shift?

I'd have to say that I thought the female characters stayed in control pretty much to the end, because Lipsha's two grandmothers are the ones that spur him into his self-recognition in the end. They are still the people pulling the strings.

Do you think the powerful nature of your female characters is a reflection on your Native American background? Do women have more power in that society?

It's hard to generalize, but I don't think so. Traditionally, I think there have certainly been various tribes where women have or have had more power, or been accepted as more powerful people, but it's certainly rare. I mean, there aren't as many recognized female leaders as one would wish, and that's true throughout the whole country. But it's different in every tribe. I think women still have a long way to go, in terms of equal opportunity and leadership and acceptance, in either society.

In "Where I Ought to Be," you wrote that the role of the Native American writer is to "tell the stories of contemporary survivors," and went on to talk about the role a writer can play in the survival of a culture. Is this a responsibility you feel consciously?

I do, sometimes. But it's impossible to choose your subject and hit it over the head and drag it home. You just can't do that. You can't hunt your subject down, but you can open the door and hope that it comes to you. I guess, at some point in my life, that's what I did. I rather consciously decided that this was important. As you can see,

I'm of mixed descent, and I really could probably choose anywhere I wanted to live in and write about. It's an odd kind of feeling, and not at all a "place to be from." You have to make a very conscious decision about what your subject is, what you want to write, what place you want to think about, what people you want to think about. I suppose I could have been an expatriate! But at some point, I thought "This is vital, no one's written this, it's part of me, and I really should write it." I began to apprentice myself to my own past, to learn more about it, although none of the book is specifically *my* particular past. It's more like "stories that could be true" about *a* reservation, somewhere near where my folks are from. It's a conscious attempt to make something with veracity, but which isn't actual.

Do you feel a certain dilemma in approaching "truth"? For example in writing about people you know, or drawing from tribal myths and stories?

In some ways. I usually write from things I've heard around the place where I live. As I've said, "stories that could be true." But I would never write anything that would be hurtful, or anything where someone had said to me, "Now don't tell anyone this." And I don't really write from tribal myth, although you can see that the characters that are talking say things that might refer to myth, and there are elements of myth, the basic stories, in much of my writing.

What about "the Story of Potchikoo"? That almost seems as if it could have been directly taken from the oral tradition.

No, that's all made up. I think my Mom used to talk about Old Man Potchikoo or something. It just struck me as a good name for a trickster type of character, and the rest just followed. I had fun with that one.

You wrote, in "Where I Ought to Be," about the primary importance of place in fiction, and how this sense is seriously lacking in contemporary American culture. Have we lost it for good, or can the writer work to acquire a sense of place?

I think you can. Take Willa Cather, who began to write about the Southwest, or Georgia O'Keefe, who moved there. Both writers acquired an excellent sense of that place, which was really an adopted landscape. You can adopt a place, or a place can adopt you. And if that place speaks to you, you'll be changed by it. If not, you can go back again and again until you know it.

We're almost out of time. Do you have any advice to give to young writers?

Sure. Be as attentive as possible to the place where you're from, to the place where you're living, or to whatever places, people, and situations you might be able to get to know. Pay close attention to the people that you meet and the situations that you're in each day. Anywhere can be important and amazing and strange.

Joseph Martin/Louise Erdrich