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**Author**

McKenzie, James

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## Lipsha's Good Road Home: The Revival of Chippewa Culture in *Love Medicine*\*

JAMES MCKENZIE

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Louise Erdrich's much praised first novel, *Love Medicine*, presents interesting problems similar to those encountered in Alice Walker's more widely acclaimed *The Color Purple*. A careless reading of either can confirm ugly, dangerous stereotypes cherished by whites: the drunken Indian, in the former; the crude black man, in the latter; violent and promiscuous figures in both.

*The Color Purple*, because it was a best seller and then a Steven Spielberg extravaganza, has been widely discussed in this context and, one trusts that in the long run the novel will be recognized as the subtle work of art it is and not "a sociological tract or a handbook for life" as one of my colleagues at the University of North Dakota said when the furor over that novel erupted here. *Love Medicine*, even though it has not vaulted to mass national attention, has distressed some Native American readers for similar reasons, as I discovered when I had the privilege of teaching the novel at Turtle Mountain Reservation. Erdrich is an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Chippewas, though not a resident of the reservation. Many students feared white readers would see the novel as Turtle Mountain history, not a work of fiction, a document that would confirm white stereotypes,

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James McKenzie is an Associate Professor of English and Peace Studies at the University of North Dakota.

\*This essay is dedicated to the students of the University of North Dakota English Education program at Turtle Mountain. Without their persistent questions and comments it would not have been written.

strengthening racism rather than helping to heal it with a dose of "love medicine."

I had thought my students' fears greatly exaggerated until I consulted some of the more widely available reviews. The results were unsettling. Robert Towers, for example, though a novelist himself, discusses *Love Medicine* as if it were yet another anthropological study of what he calls "a nearly forgotten American Indian tribe."<sup>1</sup> "The subject has much documentary interest," he writes.<sup>2</sup> Having shifted the terms of his discussion from fiction to documentary, Towers then collapses the rich diversity of characters this novel presents into the very stereotypes my students feared, making no attempt to cover his tracks:

From the medley of individual faces and voices a few generic, or tribal, features gradually emerge. The men get drunk as often as possible, and when drunk they are likely to be violent or to do wildly irresponsible or self-destructive things. . . . Meanwhile the women, with the exception of the stalwart Marie, are likely to take up with any man who comes along.<sup>3</sup>

It is difficult to imagine a reading that more thoroughly confirms precisely the fears my students had voiced.

Another reviewer, Marco Portales, makes two revealing errors in his discussion of the novel. Interestingly, each mistake reflects both racial (the "generic, or tribal features" cited by Towers) and sexual stereotyping. Perhaps the more obvious error is Portales' characterization of the lovemaking in "Wild Geese" as a rape "by the teenaged Nector."<sup>4</sup> Both the novel as a whole and the scene itself make it clear that Marie is firmly in charge. "Something happens," Nector says,

The bones of her hips lock to either side of my hips, and I am held in a light vise. . . . And then I am caught. I give way. I cannot help myself, because, to my everlasting wonder, Marie is all tight plush acceptance, graceful movements, little jabs that lead me underneath her skirt where she is slick, warm, silk.<sup>5</sup>

Marie is clearly the initiator here, taking as well as giving pleasure. Nector barely understands what has happened. When it is over he says "I have been weakened," and "I have been beaten at what I started on this hill" (p. 61).

What he had started, he thought, was a fight to rescue the pillowcase he believes Marie has stolen from the convent, as well as a chalice he thinks "might be hidden beneath her skirt" (p. 58). He hopes the nuns will give him a reward he can add to his savings. What he is saving for, in one of the chapter's several comic ironies, is "the French-style wedding band I intend to put on the finger of Lulu Nanapush" (pp.58-59). After he has found what kind of chalice actually was hidden beneath Marie's skirt and has seen her wounded hand, Nector no longer has a chance with Lulu. The ingenuously vain young man who a few minutes earlier has bragged "I can have the pick of girls. . . . Lulu Nanapush is the one," has himself been picked (pp. 57-58). At chapter's end he is sitting in the dirt, holding Marie's wounded hand and thinking: "I don't want her, but I want her, and I cannot let go" (p. 62), an eloquent tribute to the mysteries and contradictions of love.

This is not the portrait of a rapist, and one wonders at the mind-set required to mistake it as such. Nor is June Kashpaw a "prostitute who has idled her days on the main streets of oil boomtowns in North Dakota," Portales' other important misreading.<sup>6</sup> The man June has sex with before her death, rather than the "one last client" Portales refers to, is her one last hope for someone "different." Before her sad discovery that he is not, she imagines staying with him.

He could be different, she thought. The bus ticket would stay good, maybe forever. They weren't expecting her up on the reservation. She didn't even have a man there, except the one she'd divorced. Gordie. If she got desperate he would still send her money (p. 3).

This description by the narrator of her desperate hopes corroborates her niece's judgment later in the chapter: "She always planned that she would make it somewhere else first," Albertine says, "then send for the boy. But everything she tried fell through . . . her one last try had been Williston, a town full of rich, single cowboy-rigger oil trash" (p. 8). If anything, it is the man who is the "hooker," as Erdrich's choice of verbs in the sentence describing their first encounter suggests: "He hooked his arm, inviting her to enter, and she did so without hesitation, thinking only that she might tip down one or two with him and then get her bags to meet the bus" (p. 1).

Racial stereotyping, while it might be the most damaging impediment to reading the novel well, is not the only one. With its eight narrators (seven characters and one more or less omniscient narrator), its not quiet linear time sequence, and the stretch of time it covers—fifty years—*Love Medicine* offers a complex structure that demands and richly rewards the reader's active participation. Some crucial details are known only to the reader via the third-person narrator, or to the reader and one character who necessarily lacks other perspectives. No single character or guiding narrator accompanies the reader through all the novel's events. In a style reminiscent of Faulkner or Woolf, Erdrich has diffracted her story into so many separate pieces that some reviewers (*New Yorker*,<sup>8</sup> *Newsweek*<sup>9</sup>) claim the book is not a novel but a collection of short stories. Even Kathleen Sands's most perceptive and helpful discussion of *Love Medicine* in *Studies in American Indian Literature* claims the stories occur in "random order,"<sup>10</sup> and there is "no predictable pattern of development."<sup>11</sup>

*Love Medicine*, while it may not be predictable (what is "predictable" in fiction, without being formulaic?), is a novel whose chapters are not random and whose stories reach a series of conclusions which, though mercifully unprogrammatically, certainly constitute a pattern of development. No one states the pattern more succinctly than the writer herself. In an article for the *New York Times Book Review*, Erdrich says: "Contemporary Native American writers have . . . a task quite different from that of other writers. . . . In the light of enormous loss, they must tell the stories of contemporary survivors while protecting and celebrating the cores of cultures left in the wake of the catastrophe."<sup>12</sup>

*Love Medicine* performs this task for Chippewas and, thereby, for American culture as a whole. The novel is an act of deep respect for people whose lives are seldom the subject of literary art; it pays homage to the tenacity of a small, minority culture pitted against the juggernaut of contemporary American life; it is a tribute, a bowing down to that culture's ability to nourish a small band of people still neither exterminated nor utterly dissolved in a melting pot.

The novel's opening episode, the lonely death of June Kashpaw, a relative of traditional tribal leaders, represents a kind of nadir of Chippewa culture. She has tried to accommodate her-

self to the dominant culture, but her best efforts have failed utterly. Hungry, broke, cut off from family and tribe, "aged in every way except how she moved" (p. 1), she has failed to "make it" (Albertine's words) in that most superficial and quintessentially American place, an oil boomtown. She could hardly be farther from the ways and values of the traditional Chippewa life she learned from Uncle Eli.

She seems to know unconsciously of her profound alienation, however, and her last act represents an instinctive groping toward the wholeness of home. She turns her back on Williston and decides to walk home, almost two hundred miles away, even though she has a bus ticket to the reservation in her purse. It is a deliberate choice. She had been waiting for the bus when she met the "rich, single cowboy-rigger trash," who was to be her last disappointment in the white world. To return to town even to catch the bus is to risk destructive entanglement with that world again. She rejects not only the boomtown and the bus ride, but even the white man's highway, preferring to walk on the earth and travel direct as the crow flies toward home. "More drunk or more sober than she'd ever been in her life" (p. 5), she feels "as if she were walking back from a fiddle dance or a friend's house to Uncle Eli's warm, man-smelling kitchen" (p. 6).

Everything about her last hours suggests a renewal, if not a resurrection. It is the time of rebirth, early Easter morning, and she is wearing a "shell." When she first answered the rigger's summons, it was toward the Easter egg "more than anything else," she walked, "a beacon in the murky air" (p. 2). The imagery of rebirth continues after she parts company with Andy. Leaving his pickup, she feels a shock of cold, "like being born" (p. 5).

Unfortunately June mistakes the warm wind preceding the worst Easter blizzard in forty years for a Chinook, a dry wind never associated with storms. Even when the snow begins, "she did not lose her sense of direction. . . . The heavy winds couldn't blow her off course" (p. 6). Her body dies, but "the pure and naked part of her went on" (p. 6). Erdrich ends this initial episode with the same word that closes the novel—"home": "June walked over it [the snow] like water and came home" (p. 6). Besides reminding the reader of another of Christ's miracles,

walking on water, the simile "like water" completes a development begun in the novel's second paragraph. Entering the Rigger Bar "was like going underwater" (p. 2), because of the momentary blindness she experiences moving from bright to dark.

June Kashpaw's death haunts the novel. Since it occurs in the opening pages, the remainder of the novel becomes both elegy and post-mortem as other characters and especially the reader struggle to understand her life and death. Her female relatives are at a loss to explain her death. Zelda thinks she was too drunk and simply had been dumped off by the rigger; Albertine seems to think it was a passive suicide, not knowing June's perhaps willful misinterpretation of the wind; Aurelia stumbles towards several explanations but her initial comment best describes what they all know: "Nobody saw her. Nobody knows for sure what happened" (p. 12).

Only the reader, like Albertine piecing together the pies at the end of chapter one, can fit together, however imperfectly, the fragments of June's life and death; only the reader can know it was part of a turning away from Williston, a rebirth, a coming home. For the family who must live with this all-too-common event, it is another painful, suspicious death, like Henry Laramie's smashup on the railroad tracks, Henry Junior's drowning in the Red River, or the unexplained corpse Lulu found in the bush at age seven. For the utter outsider (including a superficial reader), it is the death of a poor Indian prostitute, an occasion for no loftier an emotion than pity.

June never, except in imagery available only to the reader, completes her journey home. But what she had begun, however tentatively, in turning her back on Williston and all it represents, her son Lipsha completes some three years and thirteen chapters later in the novel's final scene. Having discovered and embraced his identity and delivered his newly found father—Gerry Nanapush, the embodiment of Chippewa life—to safety in Canada, he heads home to the reservation. Crossing the same river Henry Junior has drowned in (Lipsha calls it the "boundary river" (p. 271), which could only be the Red River, separating North Dakota and Minnesota), he stops to stretch and, looking at the water, remembers the traditional Chippewa custom of offering tobacco to the water. This leads him to thoughts of June, "sunken cars" (p. 271)—clearly a reference to Henry

Junior—and the ancient ocean that once covered the Dakotas “and solved all our problems” (p. 272). The thought of drowning all Chippewa problems appeals to him briefly: “It was easy still to imagine us beneath them most unreasonable waves” (p. 272), but he quickly dispels this image of tribal suicide and chooses a more reasonable course. He hops in the car and heads back to the center of his tribal culture, the reservation. Lipsha’s concluding words ring a change on the sentence describing his mother’s death: “So there was nothing to do but cross the water and bring her home” (p. 272). Even the heavens cooperate with this closure and new beginning. As June died in the early hours of Easter morning, her coming home in the person of her son, driving the car that has come to stand for her, occurs just as the sun flares at dawn. One might almost accuse Erdrich of too patterned a development rather than the reverse.

I have said Gerry Nanapush embodies Chippewa life. This is most evident in the political realm. He is “the famous Chippewa who had songs wrote for him, whose face was on protest buttons, whose fate was argued over in courts of law, who sent press releases to the world” (p. 258). Nanapush has risen to this position of leadership among Chippewas and others through an ever-widening series of heroic events, the first of which is the archetypal Indian act of resistance, fighting a cowboy. Appropriately too, that fight began with a racial slur: he fought “to settle the question with a cowboy of whether a Chippewa was also a nigger” (p. 161).

Nanapush embodies Chippewa life in a deeper spiritual and cultural sense as well. Nanapush’s most significant actions, as his name suggests, echo those of the traditional Chippewa trickster hero and powerful spirit, Nanabozho.<sup>13</sup> These episodes adhere closely to realistic description, but Erdrich always imbues Nanapush’s actions with the magical qualities of “tricky Nanabozho” (p. 194), as Lipsha calls him in the novel’s only direct mention of this traditional Chippewa figure.

In “Scales,” for example, Nanapush impregnates Dot Adare even though he is behind prison bars; such magical impregnations are fairly standard in trickster stories. Except for the final adverb, the description is quite realistic and more than a little comic: “Through a hole ripped in her pantyhose and a hole ripped in Gerry’s jeans they somehow managed to join and, miraculously, to conceive” (p. 160). At other times his actions are



even more miraculous. His comings and goings, especially where they involve the world of white man's law, depart more obviously from realism. Though more than six feet tall and weighing two hundred and fifty pounds, he once "vanished" after greasing himself with lard and squirming "into a six-foot thick prison wall" (p. 160). On another occasion he squeezes his huge body "unbelievably through the frame [of a window] like a fat rabbit disappearing down a hole" (p. 169) in a three-story leap Albertine calls "godlike" (p. 169). His last appearance in apple (red on the outside, white on the inside) King's apartment is most magical. Without arousing anyone but Lipsha, himself a person of special powers, he somehow scales several stories of a skylight shaft to step, apparitional, between King and, appropriately, his television set, to confront him about his betrayal:

Only when he stood, enormous, gentle, completely blocking the silvery rays, only when he pointed his hand at them like a gun, did they stop drifting and bunch themselves together in sense. . . . I looked down at the man's feet. They glowed, mushroom pale in the dark. The cushioned jogging shoes were so radiant and spongy he seemed to float softly toward us (p. 258).

His exit, with the police banging on the door, is even more mysterious. Erdrich offers no explanation: "He was gone. Vanished" (p. 265). Nor does she explain how he gets inside the trunk of King's car when Lipsha has the keys.

Lipsha, the man who completes his mother's journey home, the one with the "powers" and the "touch" is, as Gerry's son, if not an avatar at least a contemporary transformation of the great Chippewa spirit hero Nanabozho. "You're a Nanapush man," his father says in his last words in the novel, "We all have this odd thing with our hearts" (p. 271). His mother, too, partakes in godlike qualities. I have already alluded to her associations with the Christian Easter story, but Erdrich also connects her with Chippewa religious traditions. In "The Beads" the reader learns that the most traditional people on the reservation think of her as having been raised by "the spirits" (p. 64). Her birth, while described in the vocabulary of Chippewa religion, suggests the Catholic mythologies of both virgin birth and immaculate conception:

It was as if she really was the child of what the old people called Manitous, invisible ones who live in the woods. I could tell, even as I washed, that the Devil had no business with June. There was no mark on her. When the sores healed she would be perfect (p. 65).

"Saint" Marie, who offers this description, would be the one to know, having confronted and defeated the Catholic version of the Devil in the hypocritical and racist Sister Leopolda.

The pattern of the novel's development in the June-Gerry-Lipsha stories suggests not only the survival but also a renewal of Chippewa culture "in the wake of the catastrophe," as Erdrich so aptly describes the case. What precise forms such a renewal might take the novel does not explore. It seems unlikely, however, that the Nanapush man who "remembered how the old ones used to offer tobacco to the water" (p. 271) would again substitute supermarket turkey hearts for the authentic Chippewa love medicine, as he does earlier in the novel, killing his pseudo-father, Nector, the man who raised him.

Lipsha is the principal but not the only sign of a renewal of Chippewa culture and political life. Lulu Lamartine (nee Nanapush), the character who is most articulate about tribal history, has become, by novel's end, an effective spokeswoman for traditional Indian values. She fights the sale of Indian land for a factory that would manufacture bangle beads and plastic tomahawks—"dreamstuff" (p. 223), she calls it—and testifies in an important land claims case. She has also become a cultural leader: "people were starting to talk, now, about her knowledge as an old time traditional" (p. 268), Lipsha tells her son Gerry. Even Marie, who earlier denied any Indian identity, makes common cause with Lulu, joining her in "running things" (p. 268).

*Love Medicine* is not an easy novel to read. In the story that lends its title to the novel, Lipsha tries to take the easy road to rekindle the marriage of the people who have raised him. But just as the plastic Indian artifacts his biological grandmother opposes would destroy authentic Chippewa culture, so the substitute turkey hearts are fatal to Nector Kashpaw. Easy medicine is bad medicine.

By novel's end, however, Lipsha is on "a good road" (p. 272) home, having struggled through to and claimed both his literal and, to some extent, his cultural identity. The reader too must struggle harder in this novel than in many, with the form itself

and, for white and other non-Indian readers, with racial stereotypes. For the reader willing to do the work the novel is itself a kind of love medicine, an antidote to the twin poisons of racial bigotry and a sugary romanticism about Native Americans, which have their common ground in stereotype. With regard to the latter form of stereotype I am reminded of Denise Levertov's short poem "The Wealth of the Destitute."

How gray and hard the brown feet of *the wretched of  
the earth*,  
How confidently the crippled from birth  
push themselves through the streets, deep in their  
lives.  
How seamed with lines of fate the hands  
of women who sit at streetcorners  
offering seeds and flowers.  
How lively their conversation together.  
How much of death they know.  
I am tired of 'the fine art of unhappiness.'<sup>14</sup>

Like the Levertov poem, *Love Medicine* strikes through the mask of such dangerous abstractions as the Fanon phrase in the poem's first line. It makes us see the hands and feet of its characters, hear their lively conversations together, "deep in their lives." The novel knows and celebrates the human wealth of each of its separate characters as well as the collective wealth of the Chippewa nation, a culture still present in the face of several centuries of murderous opposition. And it is a wealth that is beginning to grow again. *Love Medicine* is itself an instance of that growth.

#### NOTES

1. Robert Towers, "Uprooted," review of *Love Medicine* by Louise Erdrich and *Continental Drift* by Russell Banks, *New York Review of Books* (April 11, 1985): 34.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. Marco Portales, "People With Holes in Their Lives," review of *Love Medicine* by Louise Erdrich, *New York Times Book Review* (December 23, 1984): 6.
5. Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), 60-61. All future quotations from the novel are from this edition.
6. Portales, "People With Holes in Their Lives," 6.

7. *Ibid.*
8. Review of *Love Medicine*, by Louise Erdrich, *New Yorker* (January 7, 1985): 76.
9. Gene Lyons, "In Indian Territory," review of *Love Medicine* by Louise Erdrich, *Newsweek*: 70-71.
10. Kathleen M. Sands, review of *Love Medicine*, by Louise Erdrich, *Studies in American Indian Literature*, 9.1 (Winter, 1985): 15.
11. *Ibid.*, 16.
12. Louise Erdrich, "Where I Ought To Be: A Writer's Sense of Place," *New York Times Book Review* (July 28, 1985): 23.
13. For sixty-three Nanabozho stories see William Jones, comp. Truman Michelson, ed., *Ojibwa Texts*, Vol. 7, pt. 1 of *Publications of American Ethnological Society* (1917; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1974). "Chippewa" and "Ojibwa" are used interchangeably, though the former is the more common contemporary word and the one Erdrich uses throughout her novel.
14. Denise Levertov, "The Wealth of the Destitute," *The Freeing of the Dust* (New York: New Directions, 1975), 114.