

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The Bingo Palace. By Louise Erdrich.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6bj571rg>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 18(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Beidler, Peter G.

Publication Date

1994-06-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

REVIEWS

The Bingo Palace. By Louise Erdrich. New York: HarperCollins, 1994. 270 pages. \$23.00 cloth.

Louise Erdrich's new novel—the fourth in a series that includes *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen*, and *Tracks*—is another triumph for a fine writer. It confirms Erdrich's growing reputation not merely as a distinguished Native American writer but as a fine writer by anyone's standards. *The Bingo Palace* takes us back to the Chippewa reservation that Erdrich has made famous and leaves us breathlessly eager for the next novel.

Set in approximately 1987, the new novel carries us into the lives of the families and characters we came to know in *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*: Lulu Lamartine is still a political force on the reservation; Marie Kashpaw's daughter Zelda still bosses her family and still does not quite understand why they are put off by her; Lyman Lamartine continues to cheat his way into capitalism by ignoring tribal codes that others hold sacred; Fleur remains a mysterious, almost magical, presence who, now in extreme old age, cannot seem to die; Gerry Nanapush is still escaping from his jailers and, in the end, manages what may be his final escape into the cold; June is still dead, but her spirit comes back to beckon Gerry, her main man, and to help her son, Lipsha Morrissey, whom she had tossed away as a baby to drown in a slough.

The focal character in *The Bingo Palace* is Lipsha Morrissey, a young man who, in *Love Medicine*, concocted a medicine of turkey hearts that choked his adopted grandfather, Nector. The Lipsha of

this new book possesses many of the qualities he had in the earlier novel: He is naive, loving, trusting, unambitious, searching. Though overly serious, he manages to engage in episodes that make us laugh. His vision quest, for example, ends with his getting sprayed by a skunk. But Lipsha has grown: He has fallen in love.

The object of his love is a new character in the series, a lovely young woman named Shawnee Ray Toose. Lipsha's love is complicated by the fact that Shawnee Ray already has a lover, Lipsha's own uncle and boss, Lyman Lamartine, and a son Redford. Another complication is the fact that it may not be Shawnee Ray whose love he really seeks but that of the long-dead June, his mother. Part of Erdrich's triumph is that she takes us close to what quickens Lipsha and makes us care deeply about him. It has become popular to say that Erdrich has created in her stories a kind of Yoknapatawpha County of the North. Those who make this statement mean to give Erdrich the highest of compliments by comparing her accomplishment with that of William Faulkner. Like Faulkner, Erdrich has created a fictional community of families that appear and reappear in a series of works. I find it more instructive, however, to emphasize the differences, not the similarities, between Faulkner's and Erdrich's created worlds. To name only the most obvious difference, Faulkner's was a white world with a few Indians at the margins, while Erdrich's is an Indian world with a few whites at the margins. The Indianness that informs most of what happens in her fiction gives Erdrich's world a unity of its own. The importance of spirit, love, and cooperation in Erdrich's imagined North Dakota world makes it quite different from Faulkner's Mississippi.

There is something like magic in the spirit-doings of Fleur and June, who manage to help people in occult ways. Erdrich hints that it was either Fleur or the lake-spirit of Matchimanito who rescued the baby Lipsha, bagged and weighted down with stones, from drowning. And she makes us ask how the spirit of June comes to be driving the ghost car that leads Gerry and Lipsha away from their pursuers. The spirituality of this novel is accompanied by love. Love is marked most prominently in Lipsha's subordination of everything else to it—money, job, security—and in Indian reverence for the land. Love is also marked by its absence from the selfish doings of Lyman and Zelda, who appear to have lost their ability to love truly or to honor the land. The importance of love is most prominently displayed not in the

romantic love between Lipsha and Shawnee Ray, which seems to be at the novel's center, but in the desire of most of the members of this community to help each other. In this created world of the reservation, people do help one another. Emblematic is Lipsha's discovery that when he starts charging for his medicine, the medicine loses its effectiveness. Helping is what people do, not what they charge for. When love medicine is bought or paid for, it ceases to be either love or medicine.

Erdrich still surprises, even when she seems to be repeating herself. Has Zelda become the new Marie, taking in children to satisfy her own need to serve but apparently incapable of deep love? Has Shawnee Ray become the new Lulu—loved by man after man but incapable of deciding which of them she loves most, loving them all instead? Has Lyman become the new Nector, selling out to white values and forgetting the importance of the land to himself and his people? Much of this new stuff sounds familiar, but it is unmistakably new, and the familiarity merely demonstrates the depth and richness of the world Erdrich has created, a world in which a few characters demonstrate over and over to themselves and to each other the importance of spirit, love, and cooperation.

Louise Erdrich's growth as a novelist is nowhere more apparent than in her willingness to gamble in the bingo palace of fiction. One of the risks she takes is to make *The Bingo Palace*, on one level, a ghost story in which the spirits of the dead are directly involved in the affairs of the living. Another is the risk of irresolution. Not only does Erdrich not give *The Bingo Palace* a Hollywood ending in which Lipsha's consuming love for Shawnee Ray is finally rewarded, but she scarcely tells us how the love story does end. Erdrich leaves us wondering—not whether Lipsha will get his girl but, more fundamentally, whether he is even alive. In one of the final scenes of the novel, he is slowly freezing in a white car, encased in white snow, with a white baby tied to his chest. Will he die? Will the baby die? Or will both reappear in the fifth volume that is sure to come along in a couple of years to yank us once again into the world Erdrich has created, peopled by men and women it is impossible not to love—even those like Lyman, who seem incapable of love themselves.

Amazing as *Love Medicine* seemed when it burst onto the scene in 1984, this new novel makes that earlier novel look, in retrospect, like just what it was—the work of an uncertain young writer. A decade later *The Bingo Palace* shows us just how far Louise Erdrich

has come, how much more confident she is. No longer a writer of short stories who noticed one day that, hey, maybe she had a novel here and maybe she could call it *Love Medicine*, Erdrich is now a writer who knows what she has to offer to the world and offers it with boldness and love.

Peter G. Beidler
Lehigh University

Bone Dance. By Wendy Rose. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994. 109 pages. \$19.95 cloth; \$10.95 paper.

"I am that most schizophrenic of creatures, an American Indian who is both poet and anthropologist. I have, in fact, a little row of buttons up and down my ribs that I can press for the appropriate response: click, I'm an Indian; click, I'm an anthropologist; click, I'll just forget the whole thing and write a poem" (Rose, *The State of Native America*, South End Press, 1992).

The spiritual elements described in this statement are vividly portrayed in Wendy Rose's introduction to *Bone Dance*: "It seems that I could feel the trowels, feel my bones smother in paper bags in a lab, become extinct in a museum display. Rather than peering down into the excavated pit, I found that I was, instead, staring up at the archaeologist from below" (p. xiv).

Rose's *Pu tijitwa otise* (true, genuine words) cause one to wonder if the original native beings are the only people concerned about the blatant disturbance of the resting places of our beloved, a "resting" that is designed for us to continue forever.

Through the delicate *insapalw* (power) of Rose's words appears the silvery-misty-worried outline of the faces of my mother and father, my grandmothers and grandfathers, deer-brown-eyes staring up at the archaeologist. They wondered what the archaeologists were doing to them and why. There also appears the worried shine in the beautiful eyes of the mother of my twin boys. Will there ever be an end to the infamous curiosity of the western canon, excused by the search for knowledge?

It is *we-lah* (the devil) with the shovel; *we-lah* scrapes the trowel. We hear the swish of the brush, the shriek of discovery, and we feel the delicate, artistic brushing of the dust—bones unearthed for academic study, dancing.