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EDUCATION GUIDE

Three Student Guides to Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*

PETER G. BEIDLER

The recent and laudable interest in expanding the canon of American literature has elevated certain works to prominence. One of these is Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*. This fine novel has it all—a Native American woman writer, a challenging cast of characters, most of whom have at least some Indian blood, a reservation setting, an honest look at the poverty, suicide, and alcoholism that abound in Indian communities, a frown at the policies and practices of the dominant Anglo society, a wonderfully subtle humor, and, finally, a positive and reassuring focus on the power of love. *Love Medicine* is an ideal novel to teach, not only because it contains all that and more, but because it works both as a novel and as a series of short stories. Many of its pieces, after all, appeared originally as short stories. Teachers who do not have time to teach the whole novel can assign certain portions of it for class discussion and leave students to read the rest on their own.

Unfortunately, however, *Love Medicine* does not always make a good impression on readers who encounter it for the first time. It strikes them as being made up of a vast sea of partially delineated characters taking part in a wild array of events that span a too-long

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period of time. Furthermore, because the telling is not consecutive, students find that what plot there is tends to whip confusingly from before 1920 to after 1980. In short, beginning students tend to find the characters confusing, their family trees impossibly contorted, the plot disconnected.

I have found that it helps to provide first-time readers of the novel with three guides. The first is a list of ten discussion topics that I will want to talk about with my students in class. The second is a series of family trees showing the various families mentioned in the novel and italicizing the ten most important characters in the novel. The third is a quick review, in chronological order, of the most important datable events in the novel. When I first distributed these guides to my students I feared that I might be limiting too narrowly their own discoveries of what is important in the novel, that I would be depriving them of the fun of constructing their own sketches of the family trees in *Love Medicine*, and that I would be spoon-feeding them the basic outline of the plot. I have found, on the contrary, that students find these three guides helpful and stimulating. The guides help to make their first reading of the novel something like a second reading, letting them notice features they might not have noticed otherwise. The guides permit us, as a class, to get much more quickly to a discussion of the humor, the characterization, and the themes of the novel. And I am always gratified to find that the best students are ready to challenge me on some of the details I present in my guides and that they want to talk about topics I have not included in my list of discussion topics.

In any case, I offer these three guides to other teachers who may want to use or adapt one or more of them to their own teaching of a very fine novel.

GUIDE 1: DISCUSSION AREAS

These discussion areas are designed not to limit your thinking about *Love Medicine* but to stimulate it. If you had to add one additional topic to the list, what would it be, and what would you want to say about it?

a. *Love*. The theme of love is important in this novel, from the title to bringing “her” home in the last line. How is that love shown? Does it differ in kind or intensity from the love shown in non-

Indian families? Are there any antilove characters? And—oh yes—what is “love medicine”?

b. *Religion.* What are we to make of the Catholic presence in the novel? Is it a positive, a negative, or a neutral presence? Is it poison or medicine to the people? In what ways does it intersect with or conflict with a more native or “natural” religion? Does the novel offer a native alternative to Catholicism?

c. *Family.* Assuming that the Kashpaw and the Lulu/Lamartine families are “typical,” how would you characterize the typical family structure, dependency patterns, communication styles, and authority relationships among modern Indians? Does the family seem to be, in general, a positive or a negative force in Indian culture?

d. *Marie.* How do you account for Marie’s strangeness—her desire to be a nun one minute and to capture Nector in the next? Her uncertain parentage? Her strange relationship with Sister Leopolda at the Sacred Heart Mission? Her reaction to Nector’s letter and Lulu’s eye operation?

e. *Lulu.* Lulu might qualify as a kind of “earth mother”: she loves many different men, gives birth to many different children, and seems both kind and amoral. Are we supposed to like her better than Marie? Does her character help us to understand June?

f. *Alcohol.* Assess the importance of alcohol in this novel. Do many of the important events take place while the characters are drinking? Think of the various deaths—June’s, Henry’s, Henry, Jr.’s, for example. And what about Marie’s efforts to control Nector’s drinking? Is this novel an antibooze novel?

g. *Time and unity.* Is this a novel or merely a collection of short stories? Why does Erdrich tell the story in what appears to be such a confused or disjointed way? She could, after all, have arranged all the chapters in chronological order. Would it have been better if she had? Would the novel be more effective if it covered a narrower scope of time?

h. *Theme.* What is the large “point” or main idea of the novel? Do you leave the novel feeling encouraged or discouraged about these Indians and their way of life? Is it an antiwhite novel? An

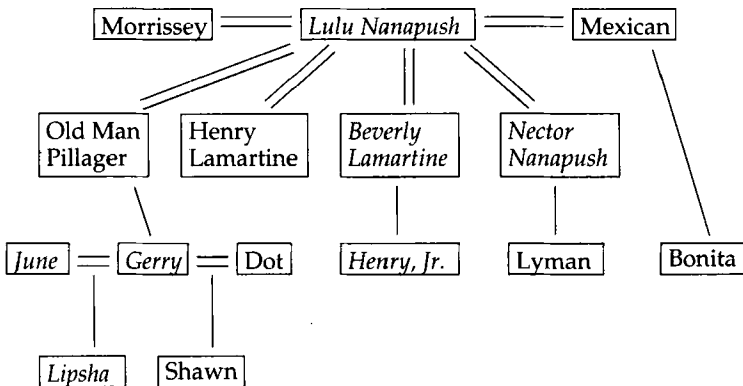
anti-Indian novel? Does it have a political point to make? An emotional point to make? Is Erdrich trying to “show us the way?” What way, and for whom? What alternative medicines are there to the love medicine of the title? Are they effective?

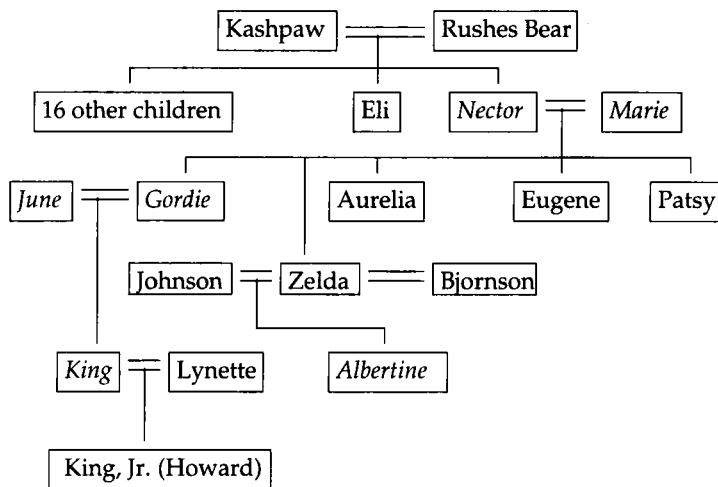
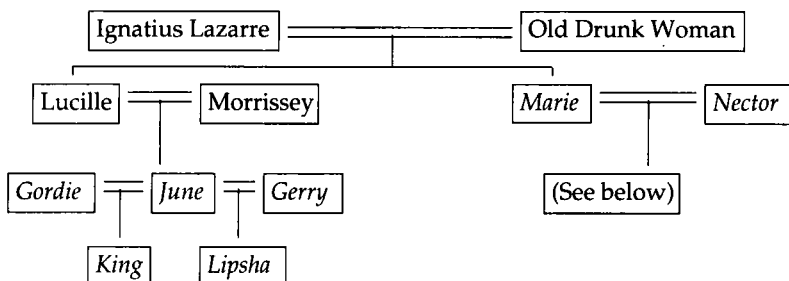
i. *Home*. Note how often “home” is mentioned in the novel and what it seems to mean. At the end of the first subchapter, for example, June “walked over it like water and came home,” and, at the end of the final subchapter, Lipsha decides to “cross the water, and bring her home.” Are they both going to the same place, or has the notion of “home” somehow changed in the course of the novel?

j. *Study guides*. Do you find these study guides helpful, or do they get in the way of your enjoyment of the challenge of reading and understanding *Love Medicine* on your own?

GUIDE 2: FAMILIES AND CHARACTERS

Because some of the characters appear in more than one family, their names may show up in more than one of the three trees below. June, for example, appears in three families. She is born into the Lazzarre family, marries into the Kashpaw family, but has an affair with Gerry, one of several sons of Lulu Nanapush. In the charts below, the double lines indicate a marital or sexual union, while the single lines indicate a child or children resulting from that union. I have italicized the names of the most important characters in *Love Medicine*.





GUIDE 3: SOME KEY DATES AND EVENTS

I have listed below some of the most important events in *Love Medicine* and the dates they took place. The list is not meant to be exhaustive but to give enough detail that readers can find their way through the somewhat confusing jumble of characters and happenings in the novel. The dates are taken either from the chapter headings or from internal evidence in the story chapters themselves. Where the actual dates are not given, I have guessed on the basis of what internal evidence there is. We are not told, for example, exactly when the twins Eli and Nector are born, but from the fact that Lulu tags around after Nector in school, I estimate that they may have been born around 1910, a few years before Lulu's birth in 1913.

- 1910(?) Eli and Nector Nanapush born.
1913 Lulu born.
1920 Marie Lazarre born; Lulu finds body of dead man in woods.
1934 Marie scorched and stabbed in hand in the convent by Sister Leopolda, then accosted on her way home by Nector, who has just killed two geese.
1935 Gordie born to Marie and Nector.
1941 Zelda born to Marie and Nector.
1945 Gerry born to Pillager and Lulu.
1948 Lucille dies; Morrissey and his mother-in-law drop June off for Marie to raise; Gordie and Aurelia try to hang June; June goes to live with Eli.
1950 Henry, Sr., killed by train; Lulu and Beverly make love in shack after the funeral (Henry, Jr. born to Lulu nine months later).
1952 Lulu and Nector start buttery affair.
1957 The Lulu-Nector affair ends when Nector burns Lulu's house; Lulu marries Beverly, who has come to take Henry, Jr., home with him; Marie takes Zelda to visit Sister Leopolda and receive her blessing.
1958 Albertine born to Zelda and Swede Johnson.
1963 Gerry kicks cowboy's balls, starts first of many jail terms; Bonita born to Lulu and Mexican.
1965 Lipsha born to Gerry and June.
1972(?) Lipsha fights with 10-year-old King.
1973 Henry, Jr., returns from Vietnam; he and Albertine chance to meet in Fargo, where Albertine loses her virginity.
1974 Henry, Jr., drowns himself in river (witnessed by Lyman).
1980 Shawn born to Gerry and Dot; Gerry kills (?) trooper.
1981 June dies; King buys a new car with the insurance money and nearly drowns Lynette; Albertine comes home from college; Gordie gets drunk, kills deer, visits convent.
1983 Nector chokes to death on turkey heart brought by Lipsha as love medicine; Marie helps Lulu after eye operation.
1984 Lipsha discovers from Lulu that Gerry and June are his parents and that Lulu is his grandmother; visits his "brother" King; helps Gerry escape in the red convertible; then brings "her" home.

I close with a brief statement about the relationship between *Love Medicine* (1984) and *Tracks* (1988). Although *Tracks* was pub-

lished later, the events it recounts take place for the most part before those in *Love Medicine*. Readers of *Tracks* will recognize some family names like Pillager and Nanapush and Morrissey and Lazarre and will see some familiar given names like Eli, Nector, Lulu, and Marie, as well as some new ones like Napoleon, Nanapush, Pauline, and Fleur. Such readers will find what appear to be discrepancies between events in *Tracks* and events in the earlier novel. In *Tracks*, for example, we find that Eli is ten years older than Nector, that Lulu is not really a Nanapush by birth (her father having probably been one of three white men who gang-raped her mother Fleur), and that Marie is not really a Lazarre at all. Rather, she is the daughter of Napoleon and Pauline, who turns up with a different name in *Love Medicine*.

The guides above, however, are based only on the information available to us in *Love Medicine*. They do not correct for information later given in *Tracks*. And, no, I am not going to tell who Pauline turns out to be or who that dead man is that Lulu discovers in the woods. Readers will have to follow *Tracks* if they want to solve those mysteries. I don't want to ruin *everything*!

[NOTE: As I was reading proof for this article, I learned that a proposed new edition of *Love Medicine*, due out in November 1993 from Henry Holt, will include four chapters not in the original novel. The new chapters, apparently taken from Erdrich's early notebooks, are to be interspersed with the old ones. The guides in this article, of course, are based on the original edition.—PGB]