

CRITICAL  
INSIGHTS

Louise Erdrich

all  
 olume:  
 itle:  
 uthor:  
 barcode:  
 ocation

Instit  
 Deliv  
 Picky  
 Nart

## The Relentless Throat Call: Louise Erdrich and Poetic Voice

Dean Rader

Most readers of this volume probably know about Louise Erdrich and her reputation as a prolific and profound fiction writer and may even be doing research on *Love Medicine* or *Tracks* for a critical paper. I want to invite readers to consider reading and writing about Erdrich's poetry. Of course, her novels are influential and provocative and gorgeous, but I would argue that her ability to describe a scene, detail a landscape, or profile a character comes from her interest in the lyric poem and her facility with poetic craft. While she is better known for her fiction, Erdrich has published three collections of poetry over twenty years and has authored some of the most important poems by any Native writer. This essay gives a brief timeline of Erdrich's underappreciated but significant poetic career and then attempts to make sense of her poetry by considering it in terms of persona and poetic voice.

### Tracing Erdrich's Poetic Production

Like Joy Harjo, Simon Ortiz, and Leslie Marmon Silko, Erdrich established herself as a literary force in the 1980s. In fact, what many lovers of her fiction do not know is that her first book of prose, *Love Medicine*, appeared the same year as her first book of poetry, *Jacklight* (1984). Just as *Love Medicine* is one of the most important books of Native fiction, so too is *Jacklight* one of the most important books of Native poetry. Both books are written in a voice that is both elegiac and celebratory, and both consider love as a possible cure, a medicine, for the chronic maladies of the Ojibwes. *Jacklight*, however, is more overtly political, as it takes on the issue of race in more specific ways. Indeed, the temptation to reimagine or reinvent the contact zone of Indians and white settlers became a major trope of Indian poetry in the 1980s and 1990s. That poetic desire to rewrite history, to reframe through language and figuration of past transgressions, underpins much of her poetry.

Organized into four sections ("Runaways," "Hunters," "The Butcher's Wife," and "Myths"), *Jacklight* contains forty poems, most of which focus on the themes suggestive of the sections in which they appear. The only poem not to appear in one of these sections is the title poem, which begins the book set off from the rest in its own self-titled segment—a kind of proem or preface. The other sections tend to explore Native issues, particularly dealing with how to heal divisive relationships between whites and Natives, Natives and the land, and the realities of the present and the constant presence of the past. "The *Jacklight* poems," Alan Shucard observes, "tend to fall into five overlapping thematic categories: poems of Indian heritage in conflict with the dominant white culture; poems of sisterhood and family; love poems; poems peopled with the shadows of figures from her past; and mythic poems, which draw upon Native American myths and the habit of mythmaking" (109). Lyrics about Ojibwe stories and traditions merge with others that foreground non-Native figures such as Mary Rowlandson and John Wayne. Erdrich is interested in myths of all kinds—whether the cultural mythologies of Wayne and Rowlandson or the genre of American Indian myths. Indeed, the final section of *Jacklight*, entitled "Myths," consists of prose poems about the trickster figure Potchikoo, which themselves read as mini-myths. They are funny, sexual, and wildly inventive.

In 1986, Erdrich confessed that she was not going to publish any more poems. She was feeling her poetry was becoming too "personal," too intimate, and she seems to have been having some anxiety about this merging of private literary production and personal emotion. However, a few years later, her second collection of poems, *Baptism of Desire*, appeared. While it is not quite accurate to say that *Baptism of Desire* feels like it was written by a completely different person, it is fair to acknowledge how distinct the two books feel from each other. It is easy to see, for example, why Erdrich was reluctant to publish many of the poems that appear in her second collection. They are intimate, private, and perhaps for many, surprisingly *Catholic*. *Jacklight* gave

some nods in this direction, but it situates itself in a specific (Ojibwe) context and makes its central themes those of Native America. In contrast, *Baptism of Desire* features more first-person poems and fewer poems that engage overtly Native themes. Much more prominent are poems that engage pregnancy, motherhood, faith, and the holy sacraments. Here, Ojibwe mythology gives way to Christian mythology, as the poet tries to navigate through mysterious interior landscapes.

Upon publication, the book received warm but meager reception, garnering only a small handful of reviews. For many reviewers, *Baptism of Desire* may have felt less revolutionary than *Jacklight* or at least more intimate. In her review, Doris Eamshaw highlights the poems' sexuality and "celebration of eros," arguing ultimately that "Erdrich is a rare phenomenon, a poet bridging several cultures who sings lovingly of her family life" (645). This claim may be true, though I wonder if this domestic reading of her work is a result of her gender. It is hard to imagine, for example, a reviewer writing of a male poet that his poems "sing lovingly of his family life." Then again, Erdrich herself genders these poems rather dramatically, foregrounding pregnancy and often making metaphorical connections between the speaker and the biblical figures of Eve and Mary.

In 2003, over a decade later, Erdrich released a beguiling collection of poems entitled *Original Fire: Selected and New Poems*, which collects and reorganizes most of the poems from her first two books and features a great deal of new material. Grouped thematically, the poems of *Original Fire* function as a map of Erdrich's poetics, revealing commonalities in both subject and chronology. Reading these new poems so many years after *Jacklight* and *Baptism of Desire*, it is fascinating to see how the poet's way of seeing the world has evolved. Many of the poems explore the many ways (both positively and negatively) the Ojibwe and Catholic spheres merge, such as in the fantastic poem "Rez Litany." The obsession with pregnancy that permeates *Baptism of Desire* is replaced by a series of poems on birthing and motherhood. The poet comes full circle.

## Poetic Voice: Persona and Narrative

Many of the reviews of Erdrich's books call attention to her "narrative poems," so it is useful to unpack this term, as it provides a good entrée into understanding how her poems work. A narrative poem is simply a poem that tells a story. In general, it has a plot, and it often features a main character that may or may not be the poet. Classic narrative poems include Homer's *Odyssey* and Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." Narrative poems tend to be more about story, plot, and character and less about figurative language, musicality, and formal experimentation, though some of the best narrative poems are also quite formal. In general, though, narrative poetry attempts to marry the best aspects of epic poetry (story, plot) with the best features of lyric poetry (compression, musical language).

Narrative poetry can be a particularly salient poetic form for Native writers because it overlaps so well with oral storytelling traditions. Part of the force of the narrative poem is its ability to capture utterance, what theorist J. L. Austin calls "performative utterances," which he describes as "statements which themselves accomplish the acts to which they refer" (qtd. in Culler 127). Prayers, sacred songs, and even incantatory language carry with them the power to alter perception and human understanding. The history and culture of narrative poetry is not quite as transformative, but, like oral narratives, it shares an emphasis on message and loaded language.

While reviewers have noted Erdrich's penchant for narrative, I have yet to come across any reading of her work that highlights her fondness for the persona poem. Persona poems, also sometimes called dramatic monologues, are poems spoken in the voice of a character that is not the author. Hugh Holman and William Harmon define a dramatic monologue as a poem in which the "character is speaking to an identifiable but silent listener at a dramatic moment in the speaker's life" (158). Probably the most famous persona poem in English, Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," is spoken in the voice of the Duke of Ferrara. Persona poems skew toward the first person, and often they are

themselves narrative poems—small monologues in which the speaker tells the audience something about himself. These poems can also be rather confessional in nature. Such gestures create intimacy and can narrow the gap between poet and audience. Many of Erdrich's most famous poems are persona poems, including "Captivity," which is spoken in the voice of Mary Rowlandson, and "Dear John Wayne," spoken, at times, in the voice of Wayne.

Fans of Erdrich's fiction will recognize her gift for storytelling and dialogue in these poems. With mini-plots and developed characters, the experience of reading these poems mirrors that of reading fiction. An interesting dilemma emerges, though, in some of the pieces in *Baptism of Desire* and *Original Fire*. In these poems in which no specific character is identified, readers tend to wonder if the speaker is Erdrich or some persona. When Erdrich writes "I," does she mean "Louise Erdrich the actual human being," or does she mean "Louise Erdrich 'the poet'"? The distinction is important.

Complicating this already complicated issue is the notion of race. Most readers tend to assume that texts written in the first person by people of color, and particularly those penned by Native authors, are narratives of actual events. Sherman Alexie writes about this phenomenon in his autobiographical essay "The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me," going so far as to complain how frequently readers (read: non-Native readers) assume the stories in his fiction and poetry are autobiography rather than literature. Since there are some factual elements in Erdrich's poems and there are many poems about motherhood (and Erdrich is a mother), there is evidence to suggest that the gap between the author's voice and the voice of the poet's persona might be very slight indeed.

For poets who, like Erdrich, rely on narrative and persona, it is helpful to read their poems through the lens of poetic voice. "Poetic voice" is hard to define, though many have tried. In a sort of how-to article for *Writer's Digest*, Laurie Zuppan correctly notes that poetic voice "has to do with the distinctive characteristics of a particular poet's work"

and "is rooted in the use and repetition of specific elements—technical elements that make a poem recognizable as belonging to one poet . . . grammar and syntax, form, music, subject matter and, last, magic—the elusive connection between a reader and a poet that transcends the work." This last part—the connection between writer and reader—is profoundly important. It can determine whether someone responds to a particular work. In his lengthy study of voice, Leslie Edgerton makes the unusual but compelling argument that "readers select certain authors to read in much the same way they select their personal friends: on the basis of the 'voice' (personality) of that person" (4). So, voice is also connected to personality, both of the author and of the characters she creates.

When making sense of Erdrich's poetry then, it is helpful to keep in mind these elements of voice and personality. How would the voice of the speaker be characterized? Is it angry? Friendly? Funny? Anguished? Just as we interpret a friend's feelings based on how he might talk, so too can we begin to interpret a poem based on how it talks to us. The remainder of this essay will look at the ways Erdrich's poems talk to the reader and how their many voices help the reader enter into conversation with them.

### Poetic Voice: *Jacklight*

*Jacklight* is a study in the persona poem. I know of few collections of poems in which there are more distinct voices than this one. The opening poem of the collection, its title poem, "Jacklight," prepares us for the ambiguity and diversity that lies ahead. Written in a first-person plural point-of-view, the reader is immediately put on edge and pulled in from the opening word:

We have come to the edge of the woods,  
out of brown grass where we slept, unseen,  
out of knotted twigs, out of leaves creaked shut,  
out of hiding. (1–4)

Who is this “we”? The speaker and reader? A family? A herd? A tribe? Is the persona speaking in literal or metaphorical terms?

These are all key questions to ask, even if they do not yield easy answers. Working through the remainder of the poem, we come across the following lines in the fourth stanza: “We smell the raw steel of their gun barrels, / mink oil on leather, their tongues of sour barley. / We smell their mothers buried chin-deep in wet dirt” (16–18). The references to guns, alcohol, and trapping help us discern the poem is probably being spoken by a group of Natives, perhaps a tribe, perhaps a family. This remains unclear, but the details of the poem are less important than the address—the fact that the speaker(s) are talking directly to the reader.

We might describe the tone as direct and inclusive. The Natives are explaining a reality to us (not *them*); so in the us-versus-them dichotomy, we are part of the “us.” The manner in which this information comes to us, though, is slightly different than we ourselves would probably express it. The poem features a great deal of repetition (note the anaphora of “out of”) and mythical language. To be sure, we are supposed to identify these poetic elements with the speakers and their values rather than the white settlers with their guns and “minds like silver hammers” (25–26). Thus, the final stanza suggests that it is “their” turn to follow the Natives and, in so doing, are likely to get lost. While we may become a little lost in the poem, it is the poem’s voice that helps us locate where we are and find our way.

Another element of poetic voice worth mentioning here is the poem’s participation in the larger body of American poetic speaking. The final lines of the poem (“how deep the woods are and lightless. / How deep the woods are” [37–38]) invoke and even reference one of the most famous American poems, Robert Frost’s “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening.” Note how similar the closing lines in Erdrich’s poems are to Frost’s “The woods are lovely, dark and deep” (13). What is amazing about “Jacklight” is how it simultaneously enacts the two personae of Indians and Robert Frost’s famous speaker. In one poem

we find, interconnected, the most unlikely pair: the voices of Indians and what is probably the most canonical American poem.

Another poem that participates in American canonicity is the famous “Dear John Wayne.” Also written in the first-person plural, the “we” of this poem is slightly different from that in “Jacklight.” Where “Jacklight” obviously takes place in the historical past before Erdrich was born, the setting of “Dear John Wayne” takes place during Erdrich’s lifetime and could very well be at least partially autobiographical:

August and the drive-in picture is packed.

We lounge on the hood of the Pontiac  
surrounded by the slow-burning spirals they sell

at the window, to vanquish the hordes of mosquitos.

Nothing works. They break through the smoke screen for  
blood. (1–5)

Our tendency is to read the “we” in this poem as Erdrich and her friends and the “they” not as Euro-American settlers, but the nameless workers in the concession stand at the drive-in theater.

Where the poem gets tricky is when it incorporates into its monologue other elements of dialogue. Interspersed throughout the poem are curious lines in italics, clearly intended to be “spoken” lines of dialogue. Spoken by whom, though, is the question:

His face moves over us,  
a thick cloud of vengeance, pitted  
like the land that was once flesh. Each rut,  
each scar makes a promise: *It is  
not over, this fight, not as long as you resist.*  
*Everything we see belongs to us.* (18–23)

Typically, italics in a poem indicate emphasis or dialogue. Here, it might be a little of both, but other elements of the poem (such as the

phrase “makes a promise” and the colon) suggest we are to read these as spoken lines. What is puzzling is the absence of any obvious person to speak these passages. The first instance seems to be spoken by “ruts” and “scars” on John Wayne’s face to the Indians who are watching the film. It is a bit odd to personify facial features, but it is strangely effective. The second italicized passage indicates a different speaker because that voice speaks back to Wayne, again, in the first-person plural. I have never known if the speaker of these two sentences is the same “person” who narrates “Dear John Wayne” or if it is some different actor on the stage of the poem.

My own reading is that there are three distinct personae at work here. The main persona is the poem’s speaker, which is probably “Louise Erdrich.” Her narrative is interrupted by a second voice, which is the voice of Wayne. He not only speaks the italicized lines above, but these from the poem’s final stanza: “*Come on, boys, we got them / where we want them, drunk, running / They’ll give us what we want, what we need*” (38–40). This mini-monologue works as a follow-up to the previous statement of removal and conquest and stands for the values of Wayne and the cowboy West. The third persona, I am less certain of, in part, because there are only two sentences (those in the third excerpted stanza above). Nonetheless, the direct address to Wayne makes me think this persona is some omniscient third-person plural community (perhaps the Ojibwes, perhaps Erdrich’s specific tribe, perhaps all indigenous peoples) that speaks as a collective back to Wayne in a moment of rebuttal, defiance.

The personae are important in “Dear John Wayne” because they serve as springboards for other interesting work the poem does. For example, the poem features a unique apostrophe, a moment when the “speaker directly and often emotionally addresses a person who is dead or otherwise not physically present” (Murfin and Ray 21). What makes this apostrophe unique is Erdrich’s use of canon Euro-American literary history to undercut the deceased Wayne, an icon of Euro-American culture. In a similar fashion, Erdrich also plays with the conventions

of the dramatic monologue: “Dear John Wayne” is not just a persona poem but a multiple-persona poem containing both monologue and dialogue. Erdrich thereby fuses Native orality with non-Native poetics in a singularly subversive way, employing established Western literary conventions to challenge the cultural machinery that produces such icons as John Wayne.

Other persona poems, including “Captivity,” “The King of Owls,” “Windigo,” and “The Strange People,” operate somewhat more conventionally and straightforwardly. The poems are written in the first person, but the voice speaking the poem is that of another being. I say “being” and not “person” because, at times, it is unclear what we are hearing, as in the case of “The Strange People,” which begins: “All night I am the doe, breathing / his name in a frozen field” (1–2). Similarly, in “Windigo,” the speaker seems not quite human. An epigraph tells us that a windigo is “a flesh-eating, wintry demon with a man buried deep inside of it” (79), a terrifying concept, especially given the opening stanza:

You knew I was coming for you, little one,  
when the kettle jumped into the fire.  
Towels flapped on the hooks,  
and the dog crept off, groaning,  
to the deepest part of the woods. (1–5)

Not too many contemporary poems can boast a first line like this one, in part because few poets could embody such bizarre figures without making the poems seem hopelessly contrived. These poems work because they straddle the fine line between human and nonhuman. They also leave a bit to the imagination. The intense subjectivity of the poems prohibits us from seeing the creatures from the outside. Also, as readers, we are the addressees—the speakers are speaking to us, so somehow we become implicated in this liminal space between worlds.

“The King of Owls” and “Captivity” also stretch the persona poem in provocative ways. The former is written from the perspective of

King Charles VI of France, while the latter, one of Erdrich's most taught and most anthologized poems, comes to us across the centuries in the voice of America's most famous captive, Mary Rowlandson. Not only do the voices of these two poems feel radically different from each other but even from the other voices in *Jacklight*'s many persona poems. King Charles, supposedly insane, begins his monologue, "They say I am excitable! / How could I not scream!" (1-2). Contrast that to Rowlandson's soft, almost contemplative tone:

One night  
he killed a deer with a young one in her  
and gave me to eat of the fawn.  
It was so tender,  
the bones like the stems of flowers. . . . (23-27)

Functioning as a kind of counternarrative to the "real" narrative, this smart revisionist lyric offers a different perspective on this historical experience, even going so far as to suggest a sexual encounter between Rowlandson and her Native captor.

By taking on the voices of Rowlandson and King Charles, Erdrich narrativizes, fictionalizes, and characterizes the poetic moment. These new versions of old events ask the reader to reconsider how she has interpreted historical data, an interesting and important point because the "fiction" of the poems questions the reliability of historical "fact." What if Rowlandson's *actual* experience is closer to the Erdrich poem than her published narrative describes? How do we know what King Charles's voice—mad or not—actually sounded like? To what degree is interpretation also invention?

These poems also do critical work in the area of race studies. That a Native poet could inhabit the voice of a Euro-American woman and a French king calls attention to assumptions we make about identity and the lyric "I." This is particularly the case for the poems in "The Butcher's Wife" section, Erdrich's most interesting persona poem sequence.

In this cycle, Erdrich tries on the identity of Mary Kröger, a German American widow of a butcher who lived on the northern plains around the turn of the twentieth century. Through an exploration of small-town politics, lust, love lost and love sought, guilt, desire, and Catholicism, Erdrich writes her way into the daily realities of her Teutonic past. It becomes a fascinating project then to compare the history-based narrative of Mary Rowlandson to that of "Indian Boarding School: The Runaways." Is Erdrich's shift from non-Native to Native persona convincing? Why might she want to embody both ethnicities? Ultimately, it is this willingness to make *Jacklight* multiperspectivist that gives the book its broad appeal and its unique voice. It is also what makes it a particularly salient book of poems for looking closely at relations between Indians and non-Indians.

### Poetic Voice: *Baptism of Desire*

*Baptism of Desire* never got the popular or critical traction enjoyed by *Jacklight*, in part for the same reasons the Mary Kröger sequence is overlooked. The Native-focused poems of *Jacklight* fit more easily into assumptions about what "Native American writing" is or should be, whereas poems from a Euro-American's perspective might not. Similarly, *Baptism of Desire* eschews mythological and historical content in favor of religious and spiritual concerns—notably Catholicism and its sacraments. One wonders if the reception of the book would have been different had she explored Ojibwe religious practices or New Age shamanistic spirituality rather than the less exotic and less politically correct Christian theology and hierarchy. Nevertheless, the Catholic-centric trajectory makes for some compelling reading, especially if considered through the lens of persona and poetic voice.

Take, for example, the distinctions between parts 1 and 2 versus those in part 5. The former is replete with poems written in various personae, while the latter feels like confessions from Erdrich herself. In both cases, the author tries on personae, but to be sure, the gap between author and persona is wider in the first two sections than in part 5. No

one could read the intensely personal poems of that final section and not ask: Is the speaker of this poem Louise Erdrich?

That said, the emotions expressed in that section overlap a great deal with those expressed early in *Baptism of Desire*. Both poems evoke a sense of exploration. They are poems shrouded in darkness but seeking light. They are poems of revelation. In the four-part poem "Saint Claire," written in the voice of Claire, the speaker elucidates this very feeling when describing a sermon by Saint Francis of Assisi:

from each widening ring a wave,  
from the waves a sea that covered the moon.  
So I was seized in total night  
and I abandoned myself in his garment  
like a fish in a net . . . (5-9)

Similarly, the following poem, "Avila," spoken from the perspective of Teresa of Avila's brother, begins with the metaphor of darkness and light: "Sister, do you remember our cave of stones, / how we entered from the white heat of afternoons, / chewed seeds, and plotted one martyrdom" (1-3). In both poems, there is a movement from darkness to light, from confusion to clarity; yet each poem retains its own specific historical characteristic. "The Visit" is a fine example of this technique. Erdrich is the author, but Mary, the mother of Jesus, is the speaker, trying to put into words the experience of the "visit" from God that left her both perplexed and pregnant:

It was not love. No flowers or ripened figs  
were in his hands, no words  
in his mouth. There was no body  
to obstruct us from each other. (1-4)

It takes courage to enter the psyche of the mother of God. It takes courage both emotionally and poetically. To let your voice become the

voice of Mary is to merge the mythical with the maternal, the poetic with the prophetic.

However, some critics claim the poetic persona is just the opposite. For them, the mask of the persona separates author and reader. They see it as a kind of costume, a performance that inhibits the reader by allowing the poet to siphon her own emotional energy into another. In *Baptism of Desire*, something else is happening, though. We see the fiction writer's desire to inhabit another being and to speak in the voice of another character, but we also see the lyric poet's desire to figure the self in language's fire.

These are the poems of the final section of *Baptism of Desire*, those written during periods of pregnancy-induced insomnia. Consider these lines from "The Fence," the opening poem of part 5:

I'm wild for everything.  
My body is a golden armor around my unborn child's body,  
and I'll die happy, here on the ground. (3-5)

And this section from "Sunflowers":

When I walk into their bedroom at night  
their cries fill my own mouth  
so full of accurate misery. (1-3)

Without question, the "I" speakers in these poems are different from those in previous selections from this book. The reader gets the sense that these children are not historical inventions or mythological creations, but rather Erdrich's own. Similarly, these feel like Erdrich's own emotions and reactions, though again, slightly figured to endow the lyric moment with metaphorical weight. These poems exist somewhere in the meeting place between everyday experience and poetic language. It is the persona that gives them both power and realism.



The final poem of the collection, "The Ritual," merges the historical with the personal and serves as a fine punctuation point to the collection. Drawing on the language and symbolism of Native idioms ("In the hour of the wolf, the hour of the horn"), Erdrich manages to fuse the mythical and the maternal:

I bind the net beneath you with the tendons of my wrist.  
I call the guardian owl  
who terrifies harm. I hold the sheaf  
of lucky flowers to your forehead. (42–46)

In so doing, she writes a new kind of Native American poetry—one that maps its own landscapes on its own terms. The poet refuses to choose between Ojibwe and German, between traditional spirituality and Catholicism. She dwells in all of them, just as she dwells in each of her characters. We hear everything in her voice.

### Poetic Voice: *Original Fire*

The note of collation with which Erdrich ends *Baptism of Desire* pervades *Original Fire*. The poet Donna Seaman praises Erdrich's ability to collapse many things into her work: "Erdrich grapples with both Native American and Christian beliefs, and the conflicts ignited by the friction between them, in poems of sweet gratitude, voluptuous ecstasy, cutting satire, seething grief, and fiery resolve" (195). A fine book, it provides connective tissue to a wonderful body of work.

Part of what makes the project interesting is how Erdrich recasts her own work. Except for the opening section, entitled "Jacklight," she does away with chronological organization and groups the poems by theme. So, the Potchikoo prose poems from both books are grouped together, as are the Mary Kröger poems. This latter section, called "The Butcher's Wife," is a kind of mini-version of Erdrich's novel *The Master Butchers Singing Club*. Reading the poems this way demonstrates not just how her two books of verse flow in and out of each other, but

also how her books of poems and her novels merge. Nanapush appears in the Potchikoo poems, and the themes of *The Bingo Palace* run through "Rez Litany." The interplay of Ojibwe daily realities and the demands of the Catholic Church that fuel *The Last Report on the Miracles of Little No Horse* are even more prevalent in *Original Fire*.

In the book's signature poem, "Rez Litany," Erdrich juxtaposes the traditional Catholic litany with her own litany of Native transgressions. Free of stanzas, this poem appears in stichic verse, which accentuates its frenetic run-on pace:

Saint Quantum, Martyr of Blood  
and Holy Protector of the Tribal Rolls,  
assist us in the final shredding which shall proceed  
on the Day of Judgment so we may all rain down  
in a blizzard of bum pull tabs  
and unchosen lottery tickets. . . . (30–36)

A poetic hagiographer, Erdrich invents her own saints (Pyromane, Quantum) with dark humor and righteous indignation in an attempt to shake Native America and white America out of their slumber regarding Native issues. Is Erdrich saying it would take a miracle to "save" the reservations? By trying on the voice of a Catholic priest saying mass, Erdrich endows this poem with unusual desperation. It sounds like a holy war.

The final section of *Original Fire*, entitled "Original Fire," picks up where *Baptism of Desire* leaves off by alternating among personas. One poem, "Sorrows of the Frog Woman," explores the transformative role of becoming a woman and mother through the voice of the mythical Ojibwe Frog Woman, while "Advice to Myself," a few pages later, sounds very much like a list a harried, overworked Erdrich might make. "Asiniig," the last poem of the book is a five-part meditation on the journey from birth to infinity. The epigraph to this poem tells the reader that *asin* means "stone" in the Ojibwe language and that the

universe began with a conversation between two stones. That aspect of communication, of talking, of conversing, connects each of the sections of the poem. It also connects each of Erdrich's books because it helps put the speaking voice of the persona into perspective. The many voices are a way to communicate about many things to many people. Erdrich writes in the final lyric "you had best learn / how to speak to us now / without the use of signs" (sec. 6, lines 6-8). Ultimately, as in *Jacklight* and *Baptism of Desire*, the voices in these poems not only help teach us how to speak, but they also teach us how to listen.

### Works Cited

- Alexie, Sherman. "The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me." *New West Reader: Essays on an Ever-Evolving Frontier*. Ed. Philip Connors. New York: Avalon, 2005. 265-79.
- Culler, Jonathan. *Structuralist Poetics*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975.
- Earnshaw, Doris. Rev. of *Baptism of Desire*, by Louise Erdrich. *World Literature Today* 64.4 (1990): 645.
- Edgerton, Leslie. *Finding Your Voice: How To Put Personality in Your Writing*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest, 2003.
- Erdrich, Louise. *Baptism of Fire*. New York: Harper, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Jacklight*. New York: Holt, 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Original Fire: New and Selected Poems*. New York: Harper, 2003.
- Frost, Robert. "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening." *Robert Frost's Poems*. Ed. Louis Untermeyer. New York: St. Martin's, 2002.
- Holman, C. Hugh, and William Harmon. *A Handbook to Literature*. 5th ed. New York: Macmillan, 1986.
- Murfin, Ross, and Supraja M. Ray. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*. Boston: Bedford, 1997.
- Seaman, Donna. "Original Fire: Selected and New Poems." *Booklist* 15 Sept. 2003: 195.
- Shucard, Alan. "Erdrich, (Karen) Louise." *Contemporary Women Poets*. Ed. Pamela L. Shelton. Detroit: St. James, 1998. 109-10.
- Zuppan, Leslie. "Find Your Poetic Voice." *Writer's Digest*. F+W Media, 11 Feb. 2008. Web. 3 Apr. 2012.

### Relative Identities: Connecting Chance and Continuance in *Love Medicine*

Jill Doerfler

"I like the deuce wild. I like that puny card becoming strategy." (348)  
 "Right and wrong were shades of meaning, not sides of a coin." (76)

*Love Medicine* is a dramatic soap opera-like tale of life on a fictional Anishinaabe (Chippewa/Ojibwe) reservation in North Dakota. The characters are both larger than life and entirely relatable. Just when one thread of the story seems to draw to a conclusion, another thread becomes increasingly tangled. When I read *Love Medicine* for the first time, I was struck by the diverse perspectives that Erdrich gave readers. I saw a novel that offered the reader a deep understanding of the complexity of Anishinaabe families. As scholar Greg Sarris has observed, the novel is about:

Families bickering. Families arguing amongst themselves, drawing lines, maintaining old boundaries. Who is in. Who is not. Gossip. Jealousy. Drinking. Love. The ties that bind. The very human need to belong, to be worthy and valued. Families. Who is Indian. Who is not. Families bound by history and blood. (181)

Families have formed the very heart of Anishinaabe culture since time immemorial. Erdrich does not provide a romantic tale where everyone gets along; she is not afraid to show the messiness and, in doing so, gives readers a chance to see the Anishinaabeg as human.

Louise Erdrich's first novel, *Love Medicine*, was published in 1984; a revised and expanded version was published in 1993.<sup>1</sup> She revised the novel again in 2009. The 1993 version included four new chapters as well as a new section in "The Beads." In the 2009 version, Erdrich removed the chapter "Lyman's Luck" and moved "The Tomahawk Factory" to the P. S. portion of the edition. As Erdrich notes in the 2009