The Interweaving of Past and Present in Louise Erdrich's Novels

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Louise Erdrich's five linked novels published between 1984 and 1996 examine the lives of an interrelated group of Native Americans and European Americans in the Upper Midwest, primarily North Dakota. They span the years from 1912 to the present and reveal how interwoven the past and the present are. Her first and second novels, *Love Medicine* (1984) and *The Beet Queen* (1986), begin in 1934 and 1932 respectively, and end in the 1970's or 1980's. In both books, the chapters are labeled according to the year each takes place, but they are not always arranged chronologically.

Her third novel, *Tracks* (1988), drafted before the earlier novels, goes further back in time to cover the years from 1912 to 1924. *The Bingo Palace* (1994) takes place mostly in the early nineties but with clear connections to the past we have seen in the other novels and with occasional chapters that are actually set thirty of forty years earlier. Her most recent novel, *Tales of Burning Love* (1996), covers a more limited time span, with the central narrative action occurring between June of 1994 and the summer of 1995 and with only one chapter, the first, set years earlier, in 1981. It is more conventionally structured than the others, presenting the past primarily as recalled by characters in the present. Each of these novels, whether structured more or less conventionally, illustrates the abiding influence of the past within the current lives of the characters.

These five novels can each stand alone as a unified whole, but the reader who knows them all will see that in some respects they are one novel, spanning eighty-three years and incorporating scores of characters, many of whom appear in several volumes. For example, Pauline, one of the two narrators of *Tracks,* is fourteen when that novel opens in 1912. She's an important presence in *Love Medicine*, puts in a cameo appearance as a nun with a camera recording a "miracle" in *The Beet Queen,* and appears once again in *Tales of Burning Love* as Sister Leopolda, an ancient nun who is being considered for official sainthood. One of the miracles she is rumored to have caused was the appearance of stigmata in the hand of a young girl associated with Leopolda years earlier. No word of explanation of this "miracle" is given in *Tales of Burning Love*, but the reader of *Love Medicine* may recall the time when Sister Leopolda stabbed the young Marie in her hand with a burning fork, leaving marks that the other nuns interpreted as

stigmata. (Although Leopolda should be only 96 in 1994, Erdrich has not calculated correctly or has not concerned herself with such minor details and describes her as being 108.)

The structures and the characters of these novels illustrate the message that the past, both cultural and personal, is not irrelevant and cannot be ignored. The present circles back to the past and forward again, characters appear, disappear, and reappear. One narrator begins a story, another takes it up, and sometimes another, before the first one enters again. Reality is in flux, always ready to expand or change when seen from another angle, a different time or a different character. These non-linear, multi-voiced story telling techniques Erdrich uses may be rooted in her own Native American heritage.

Circularity, polyvocalism, and ambiguity are all characteristic of Native American oral tradition, according to Rodney Simard (245). Leslie Marmon Silko, a mixed-blood Laguna Pueblo writer, compares the structure of Laguna expression to a spider's web "with many little threads radiating from a center, crisscrossing each other. As with the web, the structure will emerge as it is made and you must simply listen and trust, as the Pueblo people do, that meaning will be made" (54). Silko is here describing the oral storytelling techniques of the Pueblo Indians, but this description has broader application to other Native American groups whose stories have been passed on orally.

The metaphor of weaving is also used by critic Mark Childress to describe Erdrich's style in his review of *Tales of Burning Love:* "At first the structure of *Tales of Burning Love* seems . . . shaggy and chaotic. . . . The stories pop up seemingly at random, overlapping, circling back and forth through time and crossing one another in ways that are often ingenious and only occasionally confusing. Soon enough, though, Ms. Erdrich skillfully gathers up all these threads" (10). Such a style of course undercuts the importance of straight chronological time, bringing past and present into a more unified whole. Consequently, the patterns of the lives of the characters in the story take on greater richness. Catherine Rainwater writes that in Erdrich's fiction "cyclic patterns . . . best disclose the meanings of individual lives"(416). The reader of Erdrich's novels gains a fuller portrait of individual characters each time the narrative circles back and brings forth another strand from the past. And not only the reader, but the novels' characters themselves gain a fuller understanding of the meaning of their lives when they weave the past into their present. This method and theme work together to lead her readers to see that since reality is not strictly chronological, we do not leave the past behind; therefore, it must be known, acknowledged, and embraced, or at least accommodated, as a part of the present.

Several examples from the first novel of this series, *Love Medicine,* and from the last two, *The Bingo Palace* and *Tales of Burning Love,* illustrate Erdrich's cyclic storytelling technique. *Love Medicine* opens with a chapter dated 1981 about the death of June, then moves back to 1934 before going forward again, stopping at different times during the intervening years, as it recounts events of three generations of a group of interrelated families. It ends with a chapter dated 1984 in which June's young adult son, Lipsha, finally

reaches some degree of peace with her memory. Even within chapters seemingly focused on one particular year, memories serve to bring in earlier events to take their place in the present. For example, in a chapter dated 1982, Gordie, Marie Kashpaw's oldest son, shows up at her home drunk and deathly ill but still begging for more alcohol. The account focuses on that sordid present reality, but in the middle of it, Gordie suddenly remembers his trip to a rundown Minnesota resort with June the summer they were married. For five and a half pages the narrative goes back in time, and we live with him that idyllic week of swimming, making love, eating bread and apples, before the present returns and we know that he is about to join June in death. The trembling drunk who descends to the level of drinking Lysol is not the whole of Gordie. We need to see the earlier reality too.

Although *The Bingo Palace* is more chronological than *Love Medicine*, it also demonstrates the way the narrative returns to the past to disclose more of the meaning of the present. Lipsha, the discarded son of June who reached a degree of peace with her memory at the end of *Love Medicine,* is visited again by memories of his mother, who one at night appears to him as a ghost and disappoints him by being harder and more disagreeable than he had hoped for. The narrative then leaves Lipsha and the present, and a chapter is devoted to a girlhood experience of June, a violent rape that ends with her saying, "Nobody ever hold me again." The reader has just been given another strand in the web making up the character of June, whom we met in the first chapter of *Love Medicine* ten years earlier.

Once again in *Tales of Burning Love,* June's death in 1981 opens the novel. This time, however, the death is recounted from the viewpoint of the man she was with just before she died, an unnamed shadowy figure in *Love Medicine.* That man, Jack Mauser, is a central character in *Tales of Burning Love.* He is haunted by June throughout the novel. We find out he married her on impulse that final day of June's life while both were drunk in a bar. They used pop can rings for wedding bands, but the ceremony was performed by a "certified reverend" who happened to be on the next bar stool (8). In the next chapter, which skips ahead to 1994, we learn that Jack has been married four times in the thirteen years since, but "here was the truth he knew: he couldn't hold on to a woman ever since he let the first one walk from his arms into Easter snow" (13). Some minor details have been changed between the dramatic encounter of June and Jack in *Love Medicine* in 1984 and the encounter as described in *Tales of Burning Love* in 1996, but most remain the same. The big new revelation for the reader of *Tales* is that the June who appeared to be a prostitute with her customer in *Love Medicine* was, in fact, the new wife of a man who can never forget her. Readers of the earlier novels have now gained yet another dimension in their portrait of June.

This circular narrative technique implies that the past is always a part of the present, whether known and acknowledged or not. This is not only technique, but theme as well. We watch and learn as the characters within the novels demonstrate varying degrees of success in the struggle to live authentically in the present without neglecting or forgetting the past. Both

cultural and personal pasts are important. Paula Gunn Allen, well-known writer about American Indian traditions, speaks eloquently of the necessity of connecting with one's past: "Failure to know your mother, that is, your position and its attendant traditions, history, and place in the scheme of things, is failure to remember your significance, your reality, your right relationship to earth and society. It is the same as being lost, isolated, abandoned, self-estranged, and alienated from your own life" (209-10).

In Erdrich's novels Fleur Pillager is one of the characters who represents tradition, the Native American reality before the Europeans' arrival. In the first chapter of *Tracks* we hear about her, a young survivor of the disastrous consequences of the early clash of the two cultures. Nanapush narrates the first section, which opens with the events of Winter 1912. He begins with these memories: "We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall" (1). He quickly introduces us to Fleur, who is saved by her strong will and by Nanapush's care. She grows to be a stubborn woman, clinging to the old traditions and beliefs, skilled in the arts of healing and, many believed, in the arts of destroying her enemies as well. She becomes a doting mother of Lulu, but when she loses her land to the lumber interests, she cannot bear the thought of giving up her way of life in the woods. Instead she gives up her daughter and moves off alone further into the woods.

Lulu frequently tries to run away from the government school to pursue her mother, but she is always hauled back. Nanapush becomes her substitute parent when Lulu finally stops seeking her mother. Nanapush, in telling Lulu of the old events, speaks of Fleur as "the one you will not call mother" (2). Fleur admirably refuses to bend before the unfair changes the dominant society is pushing on her, but in the process she loses her daughter and the companionship of other loved ones. She continues to appear on the margins throughout the other novels, feared and admired as a medicine woman in touch with the spirit world. In *The Beet Queen* she saves Karl Adare's life as he lies along the railroad tracks, both feet badly broken by his leap from a moving train. In *Love Medicine*, she helps to save Marie Kashpaw's life during a difficult childbirth.

In *The Bingo Palace* another facet of Fleur's history is revealed in a chapter that is set in the past. Apparently she had made her way in the outside world for a time, at least long enough to acquire stylish clothes and a luxury car. She has returned to the reservation with her hair tied back in the style of the warriors of the old days who were going to meet the enemy. There she uses that flashy car as bait to lure the former Indian Agent who had bought her land into betting at cards with her. When that battle is over, the land is hers again. The last chapter of *The Bingo Palace*, entitled "Pillager Bones," recounts the death of Fleur as an old woman. She is shown pulling the family bones across the ice to the island in Matchimanito Lake to join the world of the dead. She leaves tracks behind that never disappear, and the narrator reports that even now the present-day Indians guiltily sense her watching them through the windows as they gamble: "she follows our hands with her underwater eyes as we deal the cards on green baize, as we drown our past in love of chance, as our money collects . . . " (273-4).

Fleur may not have been able to adjust comfortably to a changing world, but Erdrich makes clear that what Fleur represents, the traditions, the pride and strength of the old ways, needs to be incorporated into the present. Erdrich herself, through the telling of these stories, is doing her part to make sure those tracks do not disappear.

Two other prominent women in Erdrich's novels, Marie and Pauline, demonstrate respectively success and failure in the important task of weaving together the past and present. They begin in some respects as parallel characters, both only part Indian, both attempting to deny that part of themselves, both feeling they have a calling to become nuns in the Catholic Church. But Marie becomes a success story, one of the strong loving matriarchs of the book series, while Pauline becomes a demented, lonely woman, driving all people away.

Pauline is one of the two narrators of *Tracks*, and we observe her gradual disintegration. We meet her as a fifteen-year-old, already trying to escape her Indian heritage. She will not speak the Native language, will not bead or tan leather. She insists that her father send her to town to learn lace-making from the nuns. Circumstances send her back to the reservation, where she becomes increasingly cut off from reality. She enters the convent, where she has visions: in one God tells her she is white, "not one speck of Indian" (137). In another she sees herself conducting the souls of Indians along the road to death and being told by Christ to "Fetch more" (140). Although the religion she has formed for herself is a strange muddle of old Native beliefs, Catholic beliefs, and her own obsessions, she believes she has put her Indian past entirely behind her and that her mission is to save the Indians from themselves and from the devil.

One of the Indians she tries to save is Marie, who is also only part Indian and looks white. (It is possible that Marie may actually be the daughter born illegitimately to Pauline before she entered the convent, but that ambiguity is left unresolved.) Marie, like Pauline, feels the call to turn her back on her Indian heritage and to become a saint among the white nuns on the hill. Sister Leopolda (the name Pauline has taken) claims Marie as her mission, determined to drive the devil from her. Leopolda tells her "You have two choices. One, you can marry a no-good Indian, bear his brats, die like a dog. Or two, you can give yourself to God" (*Love Medicine* 48).

Marie can tolerate only so much abuse from Leopolda (her back scalded, her hand stabbed) before she chooses to flee the convent. On her way home she encounters Nector Kashpaw, a full-blood Indian, with whom she goes on to establish a family. She bears many children and after losing two begins to take in and mother needy children from all over the reservation. She is helped through a dangerous delivery by two older Indian women, Rushes Bear, her antagonistic mother-in-law, and Fleur, the prime representative of the old ways. They burn tobacco and sage, give her a restorative tea (Fleur knows all the old medicines), and speak the old language to her. They save her life, but beyond that, Marie says they "put the shape of it back in place" (*Love Medicine* 104).

After her children are grown and she moves to the senior citizens center, Marie begins speaking the Native

language. The narrator describes her as "holding to the old strengths Rushes Bear had taught her, having seen the new, the Catholic, the Bureau, fail her children, having known how comfortless words of English sounded in her ear" (*Love Medicine* 263). As strong and loving as Marie is, she cannot save all her children from the forces pulling them down. Alcohol is a powerful influence among Erdrich's characters, as it has been in reality for Native Americans since their encounter with whites. Marie had worked long and hard and successfully at pulling her husband Nector back time and again to sobriety and usefulness, but she cannot do the same for her oldest son, Gordie, after his wife, June, dies. As I mentioned above, he comes to her home, drunk and deathly ill. She covers him with a quilt she had made of patches from many sources: Gordie's first coat, the blanket he had brought home from the army, a baby blanket, her dead husband's jacket. A quilt is a wonderful symbol for the incorporation of parts of the past into the present, and Erdrich is not the first to use it in this way. (See Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," for example.)

But even all Marie's compassion and knowledge of how to bring the best from the past forward into the present are not enough this time. Nothing can stop Gordie from drinking. She denies him alcohol, but after he drinks Lysol and begins convulsing, all Marie can do for him is guard the door with an ax on her lap so he won't go out to die on the roads but can die in the safety of her home.

Critics Nora Barry and Mary Prescott, in commenting on Marie's ability to reshape and use the cultural past to enrich the present, say that Marie, in going up to the convent as an adolescent, is actually undertaking a quest for a vision, a male prerogative in older times. They say that the vision Marie gains is unorthodox, but it has power and compassion and it guides her at crucial points for the rest of her life (127). The vision apparently occurs at the moment when Marie gets the upper hand and is in a position to thoroughly humble Sister Leopolda. Instead, Marie is overcome with pity for Leopolda and with disgust for the dry dust of convent life. She flees and moments later encounters Nector, and so begins her life of motherhood and compassion.

According to Barry and Prescott, Marie's return to the convent twenty years later to visit Leopolda on her death bed represents her reacquainting herself in traditional fashion with her original vision. Again, she has a horrifying encounter with Leopolda, but again, it "becomes transformed into positive power for Marie" (129). (In *Tales of Burning Love* we learn that Sister Leopolda did not die then, but she dies early in *Tales.* After her death she appears to Eleanor, one of Jack's wives, as she wanders lost in a blizzard, and that vision has a similar positive impact for her.) In *Love Medicine,* Marie, after her final encounter with Leopolda, comes home to find a letter from Nector informing her that he has left her for his true love, Lulu Lamartine, with whom he has been having an affair for years. Marie is badly wounded and yet finds the strength to take him back when his effort to join with Lulu fails. And years later, when Nector is dead and both she and Lulu are living in the senior citizens center, Marie reaches out to Lulu. She helps Lulu recapture a missing element from her life by putting the "tears" in

Lulu's eyes after her surgery for cataracts. Lulu said she hadn't cried since the days she spent in the government school. The two former rivals become friends and fellow workers in their efforts to care for the well being of the reservation, to win back some of its former land, to call forth leaders, to preserve its dignity.

Lulu is the other strong matriarch who dominates *Love Medicine*. As a young woman or teenager in *Tracks*, she is the listener while Nanapush tells her the story of her parents and her early life. She is the daughter of the strong wild woman, Fleur Pillager, and early in *Love Medicine* we are told of Lulu's decision to go to live with another Pillager, Moses, on his island in the middle of Lake Matchimanito. There he is totally self-reliant, avoiding a changing world. She lives with him for a time and bears at least one child. This immersion in the traditional heritage of her people gives her a strength and wildness that last her throughout her life, even though she chooses to leave Moses and the island and return to the community of the reservation, where she mothers a whole brood of sons. Although she is in the background in *The Bingo Palace*, she continues to have influence. She is described as "full speed into politics" and "out to reclaim the original reservation, no less" (129). She is the one who sends for Lipsha, to reclaim him from his wasted life of drugs, video games, and work in a sugar beet factory, both for his own good and for the future good of the reservation.

In *The Bingo Palace*, one of the main characters is Lipsha, who, though the grandson of Lulu, was raised by Marie, whom he calls Grandma. He is early identified as different, as having a healing touch, yet he struggles in both *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace* to discover how to use it. He doesn't know his parentage until he is a young man. Marie knows the truth, as do many others, and finally Lulu tells him, believing he needs to know his past to deal with his present. He learns that his mother was June and his father Gerry Nanapush, son of Lulu and Moses Pillager. June was a beautiful doomed woman, abandoned in the woods by her mother and never able to recover from that. Her death, recounted at the beginning of *Love Medicine* and of *Tales of Burning Love,* happens as she walks across a North Dakota field in a blizzard, "going home" to the reservation, she believes. As a young girl, she had some good years living with Eli Kashpaw in the woods, where they trapped and hunted in the old ways. But when she tries to move into the modern world, leaving the reservation behind her, her life as waitress and secretary spirals down to prostitution, a brief drunken marriage to a stranger in a bar, and finally death.

She had not acknowledged her son Lipsha, and he struggles with that fact. In the last scene in *Love Medicine*, he achieves some degree of reconciliation with his memory of June and with his past. He stops his car on a bridge and looks into the dark twisting river below. He thinks of June with gratitude for turning him over to Grandma Kashpaw (Marie) as he compares himself to King, the pathetic man June did acknowledge as her son. As he stares at the river, he thinks of the vast ocean that used to cover the Dakotas, and he imagines all his people's problems being solved beneath the waves, but adds, "the truth is we live

on dry land. . . . A good road led on. So there was nothing to do but cross the water, and bring her home" (*Love Medicine* 367).

Several other incidents in *Love Medicine* and *The Bingo Palace* reveal Lipsha's continuing struggle to integrate the past and present. *Love Medicine* takes its name from the chapter of that title in which Lipsha tries to solve a problem for his Kashpaw grandparents by using love medicine to stop Nector's hankering for Lulu and tie him irrevocably to Marie. Lipsha says that he knows "the best thing would be to go ask a specialist like Old Lady Pillager" (241), but he fears her, so he takes the powers into his own hands. He tries to shoot a wild goose (they mate for life) in order to feed bits of its liver to both Marie and Nector. However, when he can't shoot the bird, he settles for buying a frozen turkey at the Red Owl as a substitute, telling himself that "the old superstitions were just that--strange beliefs" (*Love Medicine* 245) and that what really mattered was the faith. Nector, however, chokes to death in the process of eating the liver. Lipsha's experience of his grandpa's death humbles him and makes him cherish life in a new way. Marie's love and forgiveness give him new courage.

In *The Bingo Palace* we find Lipsha gathering up his courage and finally going to Fleur Pillager when he desperately wants some medicine to win the woman he feels he cannot live without, Shawnee Ray. He has new respect for the old knowledge and the old ways. His desire for Shawnee Ray also leads to his involvement in another of the old traditions. He decides to go on a vision quest. Since she is involved in some aspects of the traditional religion, Lipsha believes that might impress her. He fasts alone in the woods for days, hoping for a vision. The vision he gets is unorthodox, and he believes he has failed in his quest. He awakes to find a skunk on his sleeping bag. The skunk says, "This ain't real estate," before covering him with its powerful spray. Humiliated and disappointed, he returns home. Days later the skunk reappears in a dream and repeats its message. Now Lipsha realizes it was referring to the old Pillager land where he had been on his vision quest, land where his cousin Lyman is planning to build an elaborate new bingo palace that would draw people from the surrounding states and provinces. The vision makes Lipsha wonder if his people are choosing the wrong way to get ahead, with their emphasis on gambling. He sees that the land here is more than just real estate, and life is more than accumulating money. Erdrich presents Lipsha, the floor sweeper at the Bingo Palace, the one who often feels like he is of no account, as the one who turns to the old ways and receives the authentic vision for the present.

The final view we get of Lipsha is in Shawnee Ray's thoughts and dreams. He has stepped aside while Shawnee Ray goes to art school, although he has not given up his hope to some day win her. In the second to last chapter in *The Bingo Palace*, we see her at school, yearning for Lipsha and sewing a ribbon shirt for him to wear for traditional dancing, one of her passions. Her feelings and activity point toward the day she and Lipsha will be involved in the dancing together. Shawnee Ray and Lipsha are three generations removed from the original Fleur and Moses Pillager, who clung so tightly to

the old ways. They embrace opportunities in the world that change has brought (such as the art school Shawnee Ray attends), yet they honor and respect many of the old values, doing their part to blend the best of both worlds.

In *Tales of Burning Love* we encounter another man who learns a lesson about acknowledging and embracing the past. That man is Jack Mauser, already mentioned as the man who marries June in the opening chapter. Jack's mother was an Indian from June's reservation, but Jack has been raised primarily off the reservation, and he ignores his Native American roots. When he meets June he pretends he has no memory of the reservation. June asks, "Raised white?" to which he replies, "Don't I look it?" Her brief response is "You act it" (6).

Jack is a contractor who buys his uncle's farm land, planning to build a new development of expensive houses. In a scene that describes Jack's attitude toward the land, we find this description of Jack's weakness: "The Ojibwa part of him was so buried it didn't know what it saw looking at the dirt or sky or into a human face. Jack did not see land in the old-time Ojibwa sense, as belonging to nobody and nothing but itself. Land was something to use. . . ." His blindness to what he sees extends even to himself: "Since the Ojibwa part of Jack was inaccessible, he was a German with a trapdoor in his soul, an inner life still hidden to him" (*Tales of Burning Love* 153).

By the end of the book, he opens himself to his past, both to "the Ojibwa part" of himself and to his personal past, as he seeks to make amends with the five women he has married. In the crucial scene where Jack is searching in a blinding blizzard for the car carrying his infant son, both June and his long dead mother appear to him. He vividly recalls his Indian mother, and he "miss[es] her like a child." He remembers how "she used to break path for him in winter, all the way to school" (*Tales of Burning Love* 384). He has a vision of June, and this time he follows her through the blizzard. "She was bringing him home" (385). She leads him to the buried car in time to save his son and the young man who is keeping the baby alive by holding him against his own skin. (The young man is apparently Lipsha, June's son.) This encounter with June seems to free Jack from his paralyzing guilt over June's death, and he is able to smooth things over with wives three through five and to finally give himself wholeheartedly to Eleanor, the first of the wives he married after June and the one he loves most deeply. He returns to the reservation to escape his creditors and becomes a contractor there. Ironically, however, in light of the ending of *The Bingo Palace,* he teams with Lyman Lamartine to build a big new casino.

Erdrich has woven for us in these five linked novels a complex web of cultures, characters, and events, of past, present, and future. Relationships may seem confusing to us at times, as the narrative moves in circular fashion through time and among characters, but when all the strands are in place, we see that Erdrich's narrative technique has been used to undergird and clarify the meaning found in her characters' lives--that the past cannot be ignored and forgotten; it must be known, accepted, and integrated into the present if life is to be rich and authentic.

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