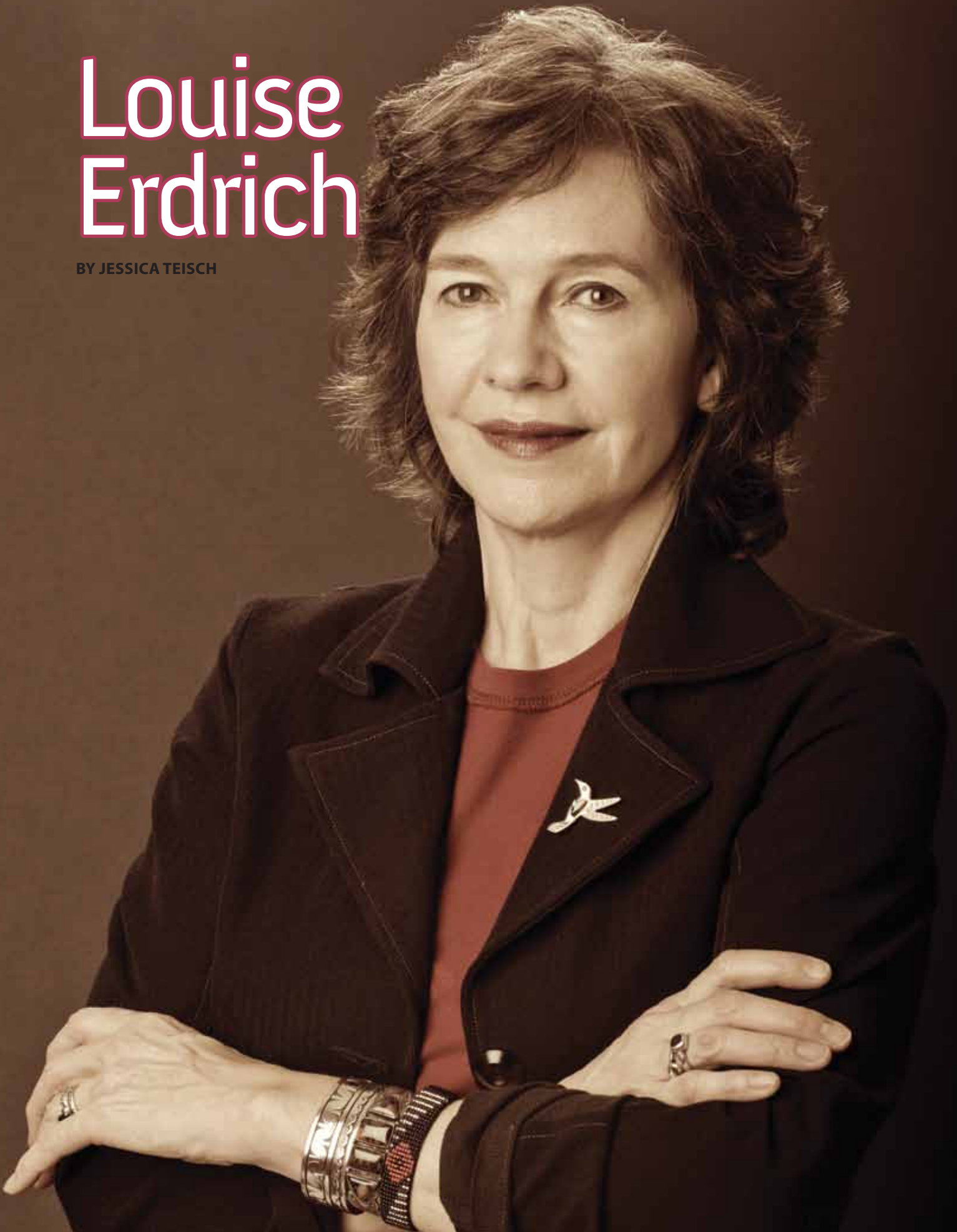


# Louise Erdrich

BY JESSICA TEISCH



**“I’VE HAD SOME STORIES FOR TWENTY YEARS,”** Louis Erdrich told the *Paris Review* in 2010. “I keep adding to them word by word. ... All of the books will be connected somehow—by history and blood and by something I have no control over, which is the writing itself. The writing is going to connect where it wants to, and I will have to try and follow along.” In this vein, Erdrich’s 14th novel *The Round House* (reviewed on page 27) reprises some of the characters and locales of the Pulitzer Prize finalist *Plague of Doves* (★★★★ **SELECTION** July/Aug 2008), which, in turn, peripherally touches on the larger stories of earlier novels.

By adding to her stories word by word and writing what she describes as “one long novel” (*Time* 4/1/01), Erdrich has created a fictional community and province—a North Dakota Ojibwe reservation and its surrounding towns—as indelible as Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County and Joyce’s Dublin. Drawing upon her own Native American heritage, Erdrich first created this world in *Love Medicine* (1984), a novel of short, interconnected narratives told by several Native American families living on the reservation.

Over the next three decades, Erdrich penned a dozen more novels (as well as short stories, children’s books, nonfiction, and poetry) that together form a loose portrait of Native Americans within a broader culture that has both denigrated and romanticized them. Characters grow and develop over time, meandering in and out of successive books. (“If they show up, they have to show up,” Erdrich told *Time*.) Themes of crime, cruelty, belonging, and exclusion characterize her tangled family trees; techniques of magical realism, nonlinear storytelling, and multiple narratives weave complex tapestries of local history and consciousness.

Karen Louise Erdrich (1954–) was raised in Wahpeton, North Dakota, by a father of German descent and a mother of French-Ojibwe origin who was born on the Turtle Mountain Ojibwe Reservation. Erdrich’s grandfather had been the tribal chair of the reservation, and her parents worked at the Bureau of Indian Falls Boarding School. The eldest of seven children, Erdrich was steeped in the rich oral tradition of Ojibwe storytelling from an early age. “The people in our families made everything into a story,” she told *Writer’s Digest* in 1991. “People just sit and the stories start coming, one after another. You just sort of grab the tail of the last person’s story: it reminds you of something and you keep going on.”

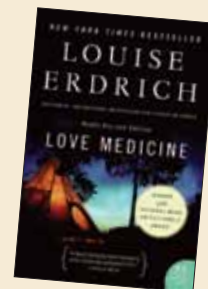
Erdrich left her small town to attend Dartmouth University, where she met her future husband, Michael Dorris, chair of the Native American Studies Department. She collaborated with him on novels that bear her name through the 1980s and 1990s. Together they raised three adopted and three biological children before they separated; Dorris later committed suicide. But the stories kept coming. Now the owner of Birchbark Books, an independent bookstore in Minneapolis, Erdrich continues to add layers upon layers to her fiction. “The story comes around,” she writes in *The Bingo Palace* (1994), “pushing at our brains, and soon we are trying to ravel back to the beginning, trying to put

families into order and make sense of things. But we start with one person, and soon another and another follows, and still another, until we are lost in the connections.”

## Love Medicine (1984; revised edition 1993)

♦ NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD

Set on a North Dakota reservation and taking place from the 1930s to the 1980s, *Love Medicine*, a series of interconnected short narratives, presents seven different perspectives (Nector Kashpaw, Lulu Lamartine, Lipsha Kashpa, and others appear in later novels) and marks the first in a loose series that forms a portrait of inter-related families living in and around the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation and the town of Argus, North Dakota. Erdrich’s conversational tone represents the Native American storytelling tradition.



**THE STORY:** A powerful multigenerational portrait of two extended Ojibwe families, the novel opens in 1981. June Morrissey, upon returning to the reservation after abandoning her son yet again, freezes to death on her way home. Though June’s story ties the novel together, Erdrich also explores a love triangle in the 1930s; the complexities of parenthood, infidelity, and sickness; Native American lineage and government policy; and the loss of cultural identity and spirituality over generations as she travels back and forth in time to explore the powerful ties that both bind and rend.

**“It would take genealogists or canon lawyers to track the consanguinity, but the blood tie is essential to the transformation of their tawdry stories from roadhouse tragedies into legends. ... Miss Erdrich’s confident use of such legends is canny; her strange and sometimes wild characters are on quests we all know, from the past and from deep inside ourselves.”** D. J. R. BRUCKNER, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 12/20/84

## The Beet Queen (1986)

Erdrich followed *Love Medicine* with *The Beet Queen*. As in her debut novel, multiple narrators share their stories. But in this complex portrait of family, sexual obsession, jealousy, and abandonment, Erdrich focuses on the pre–World War II German-American community in Argus.

**THE STORY:** Covering a 40-year span, *The Beet Queen* explores the interactions among Native Americans, half-breeds, and whites. In 1932, young Karl and Mary Adare, abandoned by their mother at a Minneapolis fair, arrive by boxcar in Argus, North Dakota, to find their aunt and uncle, who run a butcher shop. In an ill-fated twist of



events, the siblings are separated. Mary grows up in Argus and usurps her cousin's role as the favorite child; Karl heads off for parts unknown. She is reunited with her ne'er-do-well brother decades later, when he arrives in town and stirs up trouble.

**"In the course of Louise Erdrich's novel, brother and sister, husband and wife, children and parents—all run, drift or turn away from one another, leaving behind only fractured memories and a craving for some kind of connection. ... *The Beet Queen* not only uses the same method of multiple perspective narration used in that earlier book—the method pioneered by Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying*—but it also evinces similar qualities: passages of shimmering, poetic description; startling sequences of physical and emotional violence, and a cast of characters, at once ordinary and strange like eccentric folk-art figures."** MICHIKO KAKUTANI, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 8/20/86

## Tracks (1988)

*Tracks* is the third book (after *Love Medicine* and *The Beet Queen*) to explore the lives of the interrelated families on the reservation. *Tracks*, which takes place in the early 20th century, provides the backstories of several families from Erdrich's first two books (the Nanapush, the Kashpaws, the Lazarres, the Lamartines, and the Morrisseys) and provides the philosophical foundation for their future stories.

**THE STORY:** Flashing back to the winter of 1912, Erdrich describes the Ojibwe tribe's desperate struggle to save their tribal lands from private interests and the U.S. government as tuberculosis wipes out entire families. Nanapush, the sole survivor of his clan and a respected tribal elder, tells the story of Fleur Pillager, a mysterious, supernatural girl whom he found surrounded by her dead family. A second narrator, Pauline Puyat, an awkward, jealous girl of mixed heritage torn between traditional beliefs and Catholicism, selfishly plots to divide the community.

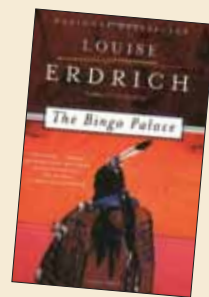
**"The tension between traditional native beliefs, the voice of Nanapush, and contemporary values rooted in Christianity, as defined through Pauline, enables *Tracks* to stand tall as a novel. But it is the bewitching character of Fleur Pillager that gives *Tracks* magic."** TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS, *LOS ANGELES TIMES*, 9/11/88

## The Bingo Palace (1994)

*The Bingo Palace* updates, yet does not resolve, various conflicts from *Love Medicine*. Set in the 1980s, it portrays the good and bad effects of a casino and a factory on the reservation community.

**THE STORY:** The aimless Lipsha Morrissey, at a crossroads in life, returns to the Argus-area reservation at his grandmother's request and soon falls deeply in love with beautiful

Shawnee Ray, a woman "semi-engaged" to Lyman Lamartine, the father of her child. Influential and wealthy, Lyman plans to open a bingo palace on sacred village ground. When he goes to work for Lyman, Lipsha struggles with conflicting loyalties to his own sudden wealth, to his heritage, and to tribal tradition, while trying to come to terms with his all-consuming passion.



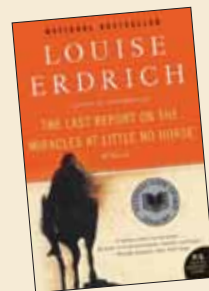
**"The problem in *The Bingo Palace* is that certain characters' stories are much more interesting than others. ... With so many individual stories threaded together, one might ask, what at heart is this novel really about? It's about family—that big murky subject we never grow tired of exploring—and particularly the intricate, often complex lines of kinship that exist among Native Americans."** JUDITH FREEMAN, *WASHINGTON POST*, 2/6/94

## The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse (2001)

♦ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

About worldly and spiritual joy, confusion and crisis, Erdrich's eighth novel reprises one of the minor characters from *Tracks*, adding another interlocking layer to her fictional universe.

**THE STORY:** Father Damien has served the Ojibwe reservation for half a century. As he approaches 100 (and imminent death), he dreads the discovery that will label him a fraud: underneath the collar, he is actually a woman who, in a moment of divine inspiration many years earlier, decided to don a dead priest's cassock. (It was "the most sincere lie a person could ever tell," Father Damien thought.) But now, to complicate matters, a liberal-minded priest arrives at the reservation to investigate certain miracles associated with Sister Leopolda (the former Pauline Puyat), whose piety is in dispute. Father Damien, faced with dual dilemmas, struggles with this knowledge.



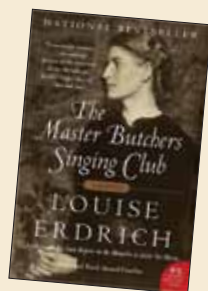
**"Sister Leopolda is one of contemporary American literature's great opportunists of conscience, and she poses problems when it comes to conversion. ... In *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, Erdrich takes us farther back in time than she ever has, so far back that she comes, in a sense, to the edge of the reservation that has been her fictional world."**

VERLYN KLINKENBORG, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 4/8/01

## The Master Butchers Singing Club (2003)

In this tale of love and forgiveness, Erdrich draws on her German-American and Native American heritage.

**THE STORY:** Young German sniper Fidelis Waldvogel returns to his home in Germany from World War I to marry Eva, the pregnant fiancée of his killed comrade. Before long, he moves his family to the promised land of America. He settles in Argus, North Dakota, opens a butcher shop, and raises his children. Delphine Watzka is a vaudeville acrobat, recently returned to Argus. She works for Eva in the shop and at home with the Waldvogel's four sons, ignoring the sexual energy crackling between her and master butcher Fidelis. Unexplained murders, an agonizing fight with cancer, child snatching, sausage making, the eponymous all-male singing club, and the World War II round out the events in this epic novel, which spans 36 years. (★★★★ SELECTION May/June 2003)



**“With the charming rhythm of stories by Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Master Butcher* moves through the events of this town in small family moments carved into legend by the power of her remarkable voice. ... To read a novel by Erdrich is to witness that daring feat, performed with the kind of elegance and grace that makes the sweep of one’s own life seem a little more miraculous, too.”** RON CHARLES, *CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR*, 2/6/03

## The Plague of Doves (2008)

- ◆ ANISFIELD-WOLF BOOK AWARD
- ◆ PULITZER PRIZE FINALIST

Philip Roth called this novel Erdrich’s “dazzling masterpiece,” and in her 12th novel, Erdrich again echoes the rich style of Native American oral traditions as she juggles multiple narrators and nonlinear story lines.

**THE STORY:** After a local white family is found murdered outside Pluto, North Dakota, in 1911, an angry mob lynches four innocent Ojibwe men from the nearby reservation. The hangings and their aftermath haunt the little town, even as, generations later, the lives of the descendants of both the victims and the vigilantes intertwine in surprising and significant ways. Fifty years after the terrible murders, teenaged Evelina Harp hears the story from her beloved Ojibwe grandfather Mooshum, and her subsequent obsession with the crime sets in motion events that may



finally allow the residents of Pluto to come to terms with their shared past. After all, as they discover, “history works itself out in the living.” (★★★★ SELECTION July/Aug 2008)

**“The question of who really murdered that farm family adds suspense to the plot, but deeper, more satisfying discoveries arrive with the slow unspooling of the community’s bloodlines, with their rich and complex romantic entanglements. ... Erdrich has created an often gorgeous, sometimes maddeningly opaque portrait of a community strangled by its own history.”** BRUCE BARCOTT, *NEW YORK TIMES BOOK*

REVIEW, 3/11/08

## FOR YOUNGER READERS

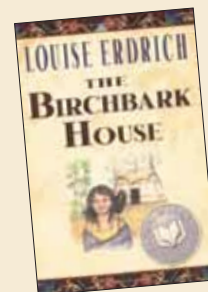
### The Birchbark House Series

Based on Erdrich’s family history, this series has been called the Native American version of *Little House on the Prairie*.

#### THE BIRCHBARK HOUSE (1999)

- ◆ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

Omakayas, a young Ojibwe girl living on an island in Lake Superior in the mid-19th century, sheds light on her family and their customs.



#### THE GAME OF SILENCE (2005)

- ◆ SCOTT O’DELL AWARD FOR HISTORICAL FICTION

In this sequel to *The Birchbark House*, a group of white visitors to the region endanger the Ojibwe’s home—and way of life—on Lake Superior.

#### THE PORCUPINE YEAR (2008)

When Omakayas is 12 winters old, she and her family leave Lake Superior in search of a new home. Amid the hardships and dangers, she relies on the land and the spirits to help guide her.



#### CHICKADEE (2012)

In 1866, Omakayas’s son Chickadee, a twin, is kidnapped and must undertake a dangerous journey home.

### Stand-Alone Children’s Books

#### GRANDMOTHER’S PIGEON (1996)

In this blend of the simple and the fantastic, a grandmother rides a porpoise to Greenland and leaves behind treasures, including three old eggs that hatch into passenger pigeons, once thought to be extinct. ■