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Book Review: Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine: A Casebook*

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To readers raised on the literary Great Plains of Rolvaag and Cather, or in the West of Native writers Momaday, Welsh, and Silko, the North Dakota of Louise Erdrich’s Ojibwa and mixed-blood characters in Love Medicine (1984, 1993) may seem a comically alien and tragically magical place. Hertha D. Wong’s casebook will prove a welcome and reliable guide to the strange practices of Love Medicine. These thirteen critical studies (complemented, even upstaged, by two Erdrich essays and interviews with her and Michael Dorris) address important questions concerning history and culture, identity and narrativity, oral and literary structure, and Erdrich’s 1993 publication of the substantially revised novel.

Forced from their Great Lakes homeland by Iroquois expansion, Erdrich’s Turtle Mountain Ojibwa have affinities to both Eastern Woodlands and Plains cultures, to the French through trade and intermarriage, and to Roman Catholicism since 1817. Erdrich’s characters register the landscapes of their history, and her novel incorporates a sense of place illuminated by many critics here, though most notably by the author herself in her essay “Where I Ought to Be: A Writer’s Sense of Place.”

Place affects psychology and technique: human characters bear the character of “both wild reservation bushland and the weathered edge of the North Dakota prairie” (Louis Owens); the Plains, farms, and woodlands form an important “unifying aspect” of the novel (Wong). Great Lakes origins reside in the dominant symbolism of water. Beginning with June Kashpaw’s death from exposure from walking across the frozen Plains toward home, the novel’s landscape of distances and boundaries, both natural and human, contains force-fields that draw the family together in mourning and destroy, or nearly destroy, the bonds that unite them (Kathleen M. Sands). Erdrich’s “vexed boundaries” (Wong) of physical, cultural, and psychic geographies occupy many of these essays, disorienting and reorienting readers into “a new way of seeing and speaking about the world” (James Ruppert).

Whether that way is new or renewed, readers are free to determine. Erdrich implicitly contrasts her work with the “elegies of vanishing virtues” of Cather’s passing homesteaders. Erdrich’s people, like her prose, understand place to be their source and destination, the “link between details and meaning,” the “mirror” of their “most intense feelings.” While the narrative puts flesh on those metaphors, Erdrich’s essay, in brilliant exposition, says much about what her storied characters endure, and why and where and how.

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