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Book Review

Louise Erdrich's *The Master Butchers Singing Club*

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The Master Butchers Singing Club, by Louise Erdrich, 2003, 389 pages. US $25.95 plus postage and handling. Available from: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022, USA.

In her eighth novel and after the success of *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001), National Book Award finalist, Louise Erdrich, of Ojibwe and German American descent, now leads us back to the German side of her heritage. *The Master Butchers Singing Club* takes place in the years between the two World Wars, then beyond to 1954, and is about the migrant experience and the meeting of the Old World with the New.

Although all her works are political in a more or less subtle way, *The Master Butchers Singing Club* shows a stronger historical texture, including not only the wars in Europe and their implications for the Americans, but also Native American elements like the Ghost Dance and the massacre of Wounded Knee. The main Native character, Cyprian Lazarre, is a marginal figure in both his homosexuality and mixedblood ethnicity. But the center of the narrative is taken by Fidelis Waldvogel, who after fighting in the first war emigrates to America with a suitcase full of what will be his means of survival: his butcher knives. Settling down in Argus, North Dakota, with his wife and four boys, Fidelis creates a singing club with other men in town who sing songs from their different countries of origin.

The link with the Old World is strong and complicated, for Fidelis's sons will fight in World War II, two on the American side, and the other two, having been sent back to Germany for an education, on the German side. The New World connection is also explored in the relationship between Fidelis and Delphine Watzka, a young American woman of uncertain origin.

Delphine befriends Fidelis's wife Eva and when she dies, takes care of her boys and husband in a story of practical, mundane but solid, real love. The novel is about family relations, both biological and not, about the land and its pull, and the construction of a national identity as a process of birth and rebirth; about parents and children, about war between kin and about song giving unity to diversity, a pattern to chaos. The female experience is also described in detail: adolescent love, mature love, women's work, women's friendship, and motherhood, biological and adoptive. As for characterization, what starts off as a weakness ends up being a strength: her characters are so real that they can be plain, unstable or ambiguous. Erdrich's profound understanding of human nature includes both the extraordinary and the mundane, and it remains as outstanding as her masterful use of language.

Erdrich's latest novel problematizes the Native American literature category and argues for the inadequacy of strict labels of ethnic definition. Readers of her previous works are surely going to check this new one out. Those expecting more Indian stories may be disappointed, but for those having appreciated Erdrich's reflections on the process of reading, it offers interesting examples of the writer's subversion of expectations, the reader's responsibility in creating meaning, and the healing power of language.