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Forum: What Shall We Read?: The Providential Fact, Alexis deTocqueville, Democracy in America

John Aloysius Coleman 1937-

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to pick up a book on a musical topic related to your interests. Even if your life isn't changed, you may find a new way into a world you thought you knew. ■

Alice V. Clark is associate professor and coordinator of music history and literature at Loyola University New Orleans.

THE PROVIDENTIAL FACT

Alexis deTocqueville, *Democracy in America*

John Coleman

Tocqueville's two-volume, *Democracy in America* is a book more often cited than truly read, let alone studied. Like the bible, it allows evocation by people of widely different political stripes. An often claimed Tocqueville quotation, "America is great because America is good" doesn't actually exist anywhere in its pages.

Some commentators evoke Tocqueville as if the America he described still exists. Who in his right mind would believe that an enlightened foreign visitor would now come, as Tocqueville and his friend Beaumont did in 1831, to study America's uniquely humane prison system, with its emphasis on rehabilitation? As John Noonan displays, in a *tour de force* chapter on Tocqueville in *The Lustre of Our Country* there were things about the America of 1831 that Tocqueville either missed or purposely omitted since they did not fit his vision for democracy in France. Patently, it was democracy more than a snapshot of America that Tocqueville sought: "I confess that in America I saw more than America; I sought the image of democracy itself with its inclinations, its character, its prejudices and its passions, in order to learn what we have to fear or hope from its progress."

Tocqueville saw many shadow sides of America. He thought its capital punishment barbaric. He warned of the anti-democratic instincts of industry, and, after 1840 in his letters, he shows strong misgivings about an emerging American imperialism, poor political leadership and the reckless spirit of American capitalism. Presciently, he wrote: "All those who seek to destroy the liberties of a democratic nation ought to know that war is the surest and shortest means to accomplish it... "Recently, one of my students lamented that the current administration never seems to have heeded

Tocqueville's insistence on the pre-conditions of democracy (rough equality of conditions, a middle class, separation of powers, an independent judiciary) in their quixotic quest to export democracy to places which lack all such pre-conditions.

Much of my own scholarly writing has focused on key motifs in Tocqueville: civil society, the public church, the nexus between religion and morality, a balance between liberty and equality. But, in a more religious sense, I have found Tocqueville's work helpful in doing what I like to call "cultural discernment." Tocqueville saw democracy as a 'providential fact', something which would emerge willy-nilly. He knew it had shadow and destructive sides and wrote to coax out its promise. I have recently been teaching and writing about globalization, which I see as a 'providential fact,' and trying, in the spirit of Tocqueville, to tease out the pre-conditions for a humane rather than a predatory globalization. ■

John Coleman, S.J., is a professor of sociology at Loyola Marymount University.

FINDING A VOICE FROM HOME

Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine*

Eric Gansworth

Louise Erdrich's novel, *Love Medicine*, recipient of a National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction in 1984, was heralded as an intimate and sweeping lyrical view of contemporary American Indian life, exceeding implicit criteria for fiction of merit, moving its readers with subtle portraits of its complex characters, who breathed with their impassioned lives and familiar heartaches we each experience. For a majority of readers, it was a trip into an exotic pocket of this country: reservation life through the 20th century, as viewed from within, but for me it was a view into a possible life.

This novel traces the intricate connections among reservation families in North Dakota from the 1930s to the 1980s with an unflinching yet considered eye, allowing its characters to tell their own necessarily compromised versions of their life histories and asking the reader to realize we each own our personal stories and that the burden is on us to understand those narratives.

I grew up on a reservation not unlike the one described in *Love Medicine*, among equally tumultuous