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# Forum: What Shall We Read?: Finding a Voice From Home, Louise Erdrich, Love Medicine

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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

ocqueville'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

ouise Erdrich's novel, *Love Medicinme*, 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

people. My family did not value books and, incongruous to my mother's vehement insistence that I get an education, our home contained only a set of outdated encyclopedias and five other books, including one novel: James Dickey's *Deliverance*. I knew some people who had books, and perhaps this is where my interest developed.

I can't say, really, when I began to love reading, but I found Love Medicine at a critical time in my development as a writer. In the middle of writing my first novel, I used the only model I had known, the work of Stephen King, his rural settings similar to my environment. However, I began to realize I was writing about the reservation and its unique culture and that the horror novel trappings were tangential at best. In finding Erdrich's novel, I came to the understanding that our lives, the lives of contemporary indigenous people, were as worthy of chronicling and celebrating as any other. Had I not found, at that particular time, strong echoes of my family and the ways we lived in the world, I might never have tried to go further in pursuing writing. I heard Erdrich's voice, strong and clear, recognized its celebratory tone and decided then to speak as well, finding the determination to add my voice, as it were, to the chorus of indigenous writers.

Eric Gansworth is a novelist and professor at Canisius College.

### THESE STORIES ARE OURS

Ivo Andric, *The Bridge on the Drina*Tim Healy

o, on the *kapia*, between the skies, the river and the hills, generation after generation learnt not to mourn overmuch what the troubled waters had borne away. They entered there into the unconscious philosophy of the town; that life was an incomprehensible marvel, since it was incessantly wasted and spent, yet none the less it lasted and endured 'like the bridge on the Drina.'"

In 1961 Ivo Andric was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, largely in recognition of his greatest novel, *The Bridge on the Drina*. The bridge was real. It was born in 1516 in the mind a ten-year old boy, torn from his mother's arms as part of a blood tribute to the Turkish Court. Decades later the boy, who had become Grand Vezir, remembered the swollen river

Drina and the little town of Vishegrad along its banks. He ordered the building of a great bridge that would make the lives of his people easier. It took seven long years to build the great stone bridge. As is true of so much that is new in life, the new bridge was not anticipated fondly by all. Some of those who sought to impede its growth paid a terrible price at the hands of the Turkish masters. But, as is also often true in life, the bridge born in blood and strife became the center of people's lives.

At the highest point on the great arch there stood a *kapia*, a wide place where stone seats had been carved out. And it was on this *kapia* that the young played their first games, where later they flirted and talked of love, where their wedding procession stopped to celebrate, where they debated the town's great matters over a cup of tea, and where in the end their funeral procession stopped one last time.

The Bridge on the Drina tells the little stories of these people through the centuries. But really these are our stories, our lives, our friends and family. These are the stories that all of us live because we are all really the same in the end, connected together by bridges seen and unseen, bridges that remind us that life is indeed an incomprehensible marvel.

Tim Healy is a retired engineering professor at Santa Clara University. For some wonderful pictures of the bridge see: http://skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=222505)