

Tips on Reading a Collection of Linked Short Fiction

A critical and commercial success since its first publication in 1984, *Love Medicine* is considered a bold look at Native American life and the ways in which tribal traditions and mainstream culture collide. Many of the chapters in the book were published first as stand-alone stories in literary magazines. Although each story or chapter stands alone successfully, the book also works as a longer narrative, with each section contributing to a unified whole.

The book's chapters are told from the perspective of several different narrators weaving together the lives of two Chippewa families. As you read the book and notice a shift in the narrative perspective, ask yourself why the author might have chosen to change the point of view.

Each story in the book has its own protagonist and conflict. Readers may want to ask themselves whose story is being told. What does the protagonist desire more than anything else? What stands in his or her way? Make notes about the characters who appear in each story and how their roles change over the course of the book.

Setting also plays an important role in understanding the individual stories and how they fit together. Setting can affect the tone and mood of a work of fiction. Much of the action

in *Love Medicine* takes place on a reservation in North Dakota, but there are also scenes off the reservation. Readers should be aware of changes in setting, and how those changes vary even within a single story. Be aware of how the narrator describes the setting and what emotions those descriptions are intended to evoke.

Louise Erdrich uses recurring characters, places, and objects as symbols throughout *Love Medicine*. Readers should note each place where these symbols appear in the text and consider how they contribute to a story's meaning. If a symbol is used in more than one story, it's important to note how the symbolic value of the object affects the book as a whole.

Once readers have read and appreciated the stories as separate pieces of writing, they can begin to discover how they work together to create a unified whole. Characters, settings, and events recur throughout the book, giving readers additional perspective on the way some Native Americans straddle two cultural identities that Erdrich describes as having "one foot on tribal lands and one foot in ordinary middle-class life."