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Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

Louise Erdrich was born in 1954 in Little Falls, Minnesota, eldest of seven children. Her parents were both teachers; they made sure that Louise and her siblings were exposed to classic literature and poetry, as well as the oral storytelling traditions of their Chippewa ancestors. Louise's father even paid her small sums for the stories she wrote as a child. Two of Erdrich's sisters also grew up to be writers.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Students should take notes as they listen. Split the students into three groups. Have each group read one of the following Reader's Guide essays: "Introduction to the Novel" (p. 3), "Louise Erdrich, b. 1954" (pp. 5–7), or "An Interview with Louise Erdrich" (pp. 10–11). Have each group present what they've learned.

As a class, ask students to consider which events in Erdrich's life might have had the greatest impact on her writing. They might also note what factors influenced not just Erdrich, but two of her siblings to also become writers. Finally, ask how growing up in a home in which two very different cultures were blended might have shaped her writing.

Writing Exercise

Louise Erdrich has said that the family tales she heard as a child influenced the way she thinks about storytelling. Students should write a brief essay (three or four paragraphs) about one of the family stories they heard repeatedly as children. Who told the story, and why? Were conflicting versions of the story told by different family members? How did the student's understanding of events in the story change over time?

Homework

Students should read the first chapter of the novel (pp. 1–42), in which many characters are introduced. Ask students to begin keeping a reader's journal. For the first entry, students should make a list of the characters, describe which one(s) they found most interesting, and why. Who narrates the first chapter?

Ask students to pay close attention to June Kashpaw. What do we learn about her at the beginning of the chapter? How does our opinion of her change as we read further and get additional information?