

10

Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Love Medicine, Louise Erdrich's first novel, was both a commercial and critical success, winning the 1984 National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction, the Sue Kaufman Prize for Best First Fiction, the Virginia McCormick Scully Prize, and the *Los Angeles Times* award for fiction. Although Erdrich published a book of poetry and a number of short stories prior to *Love Medicine*, the novel's complex structure and unique, interwoven voices cemented her literary reputation. In addition, the novel's focus on the lives of contemporary Chippewa men and women had a broad, cross-cultural appeal, serving for many readers as a gateway into Native American fiction.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Write these on the board. What elevates a work of fiction to greatness? Then ask them to discuss, within groups, other books they know that include some of these characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *Love Medicine*? Is this a great book?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Erdrich create in *Love Medicine*? How do the individual characters' voices in the novel contribute to its overall tone and feel?

Divide the class into groups and have each group determine the single most important theme of the book. Have a spokesperson from each group explain the group's decision, with references from the text. Write the themes on the board. Do the groups agree?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a letter to a friend, perhaps one who does not like to read, explaining why *Love Medicine* is a good book. The student should make an argument that explains why this book has meaning for all people, not just those who have a special interest in Native Americans.

Homework

Students will finish their essays and turn them in the next time the class meets.