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Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes within the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

Love Medicine takes place over a 50-year span (1934–1984), a period of change and turmoil for Native Americans. Although real-world events (the Vietnam War, the rise of tribal groups advocating for increased self-determination) figure in the novel, they are kept mostly in the background. Many of the chronic problems of reservation life during this period such as poverty, joblessness, substance abuse, depression, and suicide afflict the novel's characters.

By endowing the main characters with extraordinary endurance and strong family bonds, Erdrich avoids casting them simply as victims of larger societal forces. In fact, other Native American writers have sometimes taken issue with *Love Medicine* and other Erdrich novels for downplaying the challenges facing modern Native Americans.

Discussion Activities

Copy and distribute the Reader's Guide essay "The History of the Chippewa" (pp. 8–9) and Teacher's Guide Handouts One and Two. Divide your class into three groups. Assign each group an essay. Ask students to present what they've learned to the class.

Although June Kashpaw dies in the first seven pages, the reader gradually learns quite a bit about her throughout the rest of the chapter. Ask the students to summarize what they know about June by the end of the chapter, and to locate specific places in the text where that information is delivered to the reader.

Writing Exercise

In the first chapter, Albertine Johnson takes a break from her nursing studies to visit her family. Her mother and aunts make mildly negative comments about her education and her future. Ask students to write a brief essay about the pressures that Albertine experiences on her visit home, and why her relatives might respond as they do to her presence.

Homework

Have students read "Saint Marie," "Wild Geese," and "The Island" (pp. 43–83). They should consider who the speakers are in each of these chapters. Have students write a paragraph about each chapter's narrator in their reader's journals. How does the fact that each chapter has a different first-person narrator alter the reader's experience?