

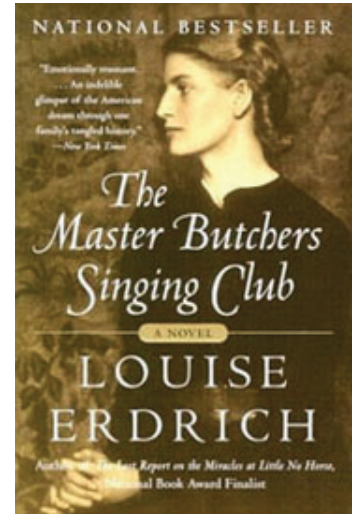


Voices
from the
Gaps

The Master Butchers Singing Club by Louise Erdrich

In the oral history of the massacre at Wounded Knee it is said two people from the north, Cree or Ojibwe, died with Bigfoot's people. I have always wondered about them. The picture of the young butcher on the cover of this book is of my grandfather Ludwig Erdrich. He fought in the trenches on the German side in World War I. His sons served on the American side in World War II. This book is fiction except for snout salad, the bull's pizzle, and my grandmother's short stint as a human table in a vaudeville act.

Although her story is mostly fiction, Louise Erdrich includes in her novel *The Master Butchers Singing Club* several fascinating characters closely resembling non-fictional people close to her. For example, one of the novel's most intriguing and eccentric characters, Step-and-a-half, was supposedly one of the two aforementioned "people from the north" who witnessed the brutal massacre of the Lakota at Wounded Knee. She is a strange and mysterious junk collector who rummages through people's garbage at night and wanders from town to town, seemingly aimlessly, because "walking was the only way to outdistance all that she remembered and did not remember, and the space into which she walked was comfortingly empty of human cruelty." There are also Cyprian (half-Indian and half-French) and Delphine (the daughter of the town drunk), lovers and the stars of an amazing human balancing act that travels from town to town, entertaining the locals for spare change. Cyprian struggles with his sexuality, and he and Delphine struggle to come to grips with their relationship. Another of Erdrich's interesting characters is one of the story's protagonists, Fidelis Waldvogel, a stoic and reticent German soldier during World War I renowned for his acute sniping skills. After the war, Fidelis marries the pregnant widow (Eva) of his fallen comrade, resumes the family business as a master butcher, and armed with a suitcase full of butcher's knives and delectable sausages, sets out across the sea for Seattle in search of Wonderbread's birthplace.



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By the time he sells his last sausage, Fidelis is in Argus, North Dakota, and decides to settle there. His new wife, Eva, and his adopted son Franz soon join him in Argus, and Fidelis proceeds to found a butcher shop in town, quickly creating a comical and short-lived rivalry with the town's incumbent butcher, Pete Kozka. Fidelis and Eva also have three sons together, in addition to Eva's son Franz. Feeling nostalgic, Fidelis soon establishes in Argus a singing club common to his native Germany, which includes all-comers who can carry a tune, from the town sheriff (Hock) to the town drunk (Roy Watzka). Toward the end of the novel, as WWII sets in, Fidelis' oldest two sons fight for America in the war, while his younger twin sons fight for Germany (one becomes an American POW, and the other is killed in combat).

Contrary to what readers might assume, however, the novel has in fact little to do with the singing club; in fact, the club is only mentioned a handful of times. Instead, this novel is generally about romantic and unbridled passion, unaffectionate and stoic love, human brutality and abandonment, dealing with loss, and even murder. Erdrich does a masterful job of including several different storylines and characters into each chapter, usually ending each line rather abruptly or open-endedly, and then pages or even chapters later returns to the particular storyline to conclude. It may not make complete sense initially, but it leaves the reader eager to solve each of the story's mysteries.

While this novel is in fact many separate yet simultaneously occurring stories woven into one, the common mood is somber and discouraging, and filled with detached lust, human brutality, and tragedy as Erdrich's characters attempt to cope with myriad hardships and complicated emotions they themselves know not how to deal with. A rather unique and interesting page-turner wrought with common yet amazing characters and storylines, mysterious twists and turns, and a gamut of human emotion, *The Master Butchers Singing Club* is a captivating, fascinating, and surprising story readers of any age or gender will surely enjoy.

Reviewed by Chad Renz