

# **LaRose Study Guide**

## **LaRose by Louise Erdrich**

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# Plot Summary

NOTE: This study guide refers to the HarperCollins 2016 First Hardcover Edition of *LaRose* by Louise Erdrich.

*LaRose* is a contemporary novel of family and redemption by Louise Erdrich, which revolves around the intended and unwitting efforts of young *LaRose* Iron to heal his broken family following a tragic death. When the novel begins, *LaRose*'s father, Landreaux, is hunting deer on the boundary between his property and the Ravich property next door. There, Peter and his wife, Nola, the half-sister of Landreaux's wife, Emmaline, live with their children Dusty and Maggie. Dusty is best friends with *LaRose*. Landreaux's older children (Josette, Snow, Hollis, and Coochy) get along well with Maggie. Landreaux discovers a deer along the edge of the property and fires, but the deer escapes. It is during this time that Landreaux realizes he has accidentally shot and killed Dusty, whom he did not see behind the deer. Landreaux is devastated, and Peter and Nola are sickened with grief.

Following Ojibwe Indian custom, Landreaux and Emmaline both decide to allow their youngest son, *LaRose*, to live with the Raviches. *LaRose* is the namesake of a tradition in Emmaline's line wherein the youngest child is always named *LaRose* to avoid bad luck and misfortune, while serving as a life-saving presence in another's life. This stretches all the way back to the 1830s. Peter and Nola quickly warm up to *LaRose*, though they miss Dusty terribly. At the same time, Landreaux and Emmaline miss *LaRose* terribly. Father Travis, the local Catholic priest, does his best to reassure Emmaline, who wants *LaRose* back.

The Raviches and the Irons decide to share *LaRose* back and forth, month by month. Meanwhile, *LaRose* convenes with the dead and learns from Dusty that the killing was indeed an accident. He tells *LaRose* to tell Landreaux that he should not blame himself. Still, Landreaux feels guilty.

*LaRose* and Maggie also warm up to one another, during which time Maggie confesses she fears her mother is suicidal. *LaRose* vows to help. He removes all poisonous and deadly things from the house, such as the bullets from Peter's hunting rifle. When Nola learns that *LaRose* is communicating with Dusty on the other side, she is relieved. Her darkness fades.

While this occurs, a shifty local named Romeo is determined to prove that the killing of Dusty was not an accident in order to regain respect in the community and to get back at Landreaux for the past. Romeo is the real father of Hollis. He gave Hollis up to Emmaline and Landreaux to have a better shot at life. Romeo is in love with Emmaline. In the past, Romeo believes that Landreaux stole Emmaline away from him. He also believes that his arm and leg injury, sustained during a time when he and Landreaux ran away from boarding school, are Landreaux's fault.



Romeo obtains a copy of the coroner's report on Dusty and invents a story wherein Dusty would not have been killed outright. Instead, he would have bled to death while Landreaux went and called for help and restrained Nola from running out to Dusty's body. He tells this to Peter, who then asks to go hunting with Landreaux. Peter confronts Landreaux with the information about Dusty's death, leading Peter to believe he will now be killed. However, the gun that Peter intends to use to kill Landreaux is empty, thanks to LaRose. Peter then realizes LaRose has inadvertently saved not only Landreaux's life, but his as well.

When the novel ends, Hollis graduates from high school. He is preparing to go into the National Guard. Father Travis transfers because he has fallen in love with Emmaline and knows he can never have her. Josette, Snow, and Maggie have become inseparable, while the Irons and the Raviches put the past behind them and finally come together. Romeo is forgiven. He receives an invitation to Hollis's graduation party. LaRose is happy to see both families finally come together. Hollis and Josette begin a romance.



# Pages 1 – 75

## Summary

Two Houses: 1999-2000

In *The Door*, Landreaux Iron, a devout Catholic and North Dakota Ojibwe Indian who works as a physical therapy assistant, personal care assistant, and who is training as a dialysis technician goes hunting for deer along the edge of his land as he always does. Landreaux's wife is Emmaline, who is even more devout. They have five children, Hollis, Snow, Josette, Willard (known as "Coochy"), and the youngest, LaRose. They are friends with the kids on the land next door belonging to Peter Ravich. Ravich's son Dusty is best friends with LaRose. LaRose is named after other LaRoses in the Iron family, going back generations. Landreaux fires at a buck, but the buck bolts. Landreaux then realizes he has unwittingly killed Ravich's son, Dusty, dressed in all tan and standing behind the deer. Landreaux is horrified and rushes to call the shooting in and tell Nola, Ravich's wife (and Emmaline's half-sister), about the shooting. Nola is enraged and wants the tribal police to execute Landreaux. Police Chief Zack Peace and county coroner Georgie Mighty handle Dusty's body. Zack tells Emmaline to keep an eye on Landreaux.

Landreaux is soon cleared of any wrongdoing, and he and Emmaline meet with Father Travis Wozniak, a United States Marine-turned-Catholic priest, to pray and talk about the future. When they attend Dusty's funeral, they sit in the back. That night, Landreaux drives off the reservation to the liquor store in Hoopdance. While drinking, he is wishing he could go back in time. Landreaux burns his gun.

The novel suddenly shifts back in time to the year 1839, to an isolated Ojibwe trading post. Mink, a once-beautiful woman hideously scarred by fire, wants alcohol, tobacco, and some other items. Mackinnon, the owner, and his clerk, seventeen year-old Wolfred Roberts who has come west from New Hampshire, have dealt with Mink before. Mink screeches and howls, offering to trade her young daughter for some rum. Mackinnon kicks Mink and tries to send her off, but she will not go. Eventually, Mink caves in and takes Mink's daughter in exchange for alcohol and supplies. The novel then suddenly returns to 1999. Landreaux and Emmaline go to see Peter and Nola. Peter and Nola are not happy to see them. They are stunned when Landreaux and Emmaline give them LaRose, saying the child is now their child.

In *The Gate*, Peter and Nola tentatively accept LaRose into their home, worried about how they will all adjust to the changes. LaRose is sent to sleep with his new older sister, Maggie. She attempts to explain the new situation to LaRose and to comfort him. The novel shifts back to 1839. Woldred comes to consider the fact that Mackinnon's trade deal with Mink saved her eleven-year-old girl from a far worse fate. The girl refuses to give her name, but she goes about setting animal traps.



In the present, Peter heads over to see Landreaux. As Peter passes the spot where his son was killed, he sees a light-colored dog that has been hanging around lately. Peter takes a moment to lie down on the ground where Dusty died. He imagines Dusty's life flowing into the earth and the world around him. Meanwhile, Landreaux is at the Elders Lodge, tending to his mother-in-law, Mrs. Peace, a former teacher. He ensures she is doing well and checks her medications. Mrs. Peace, who had been Landreaux's teacher, gives him an old paper he used to transcribe and memorize the poem "Invictus" with the words "I will not run away" written over and over. Landreaux then goes to visit his next patient, Ottie Plume, and his wife, Baptiste. Ottie has lost a foot to diabetes. He must be cared for at home, as well as taken to dialysis. Ottie is proud that he has been able to use the restroom unassisted, and declares that "life don't quit (p. 28)."

When Landreaux stops at the Hot Bar at Whitey's Gas Station for mozzarella sticks for his kids, he sees Romeo Puyat, an old friend and school rival who believes Landreaux stole Emmaline from him. When Landreaux comes out with food, he sees Romeo siphoning gas out of his car. Landreaux is not bothered by this, for he believes it is one of many punishments he is to face for killing Dusty. Meanwhile, after a few weeks have passed, LaRose stops crying so much, even after Maggie and the others explain to him why he now lives at the Ravich house. With Maggie's encouragement, LaRose warms up to Nola, and begins to call Nola "Mother". At the grocery store with Peter, LaRose sees Emmaline. Peter kindly watches on and refuses to interfere when LaRose embraces his real mother, and spends time with her at the store. Emmaline then goes to see Father Travis, who is volunteering with local men to build a walkway by the lake. Emmaline confesses she never wanted to give LaRose to the Raviches, but did so out of a sense of justice. She had hoped to be allowed to see LaRose every so often, but Nola has refused this –and now Emmaline wants her son back. Father Travis tells Emmaline she has every right to retrieve her son.

Landreaux later drops off his daughters, eighth-grader Snow, and seventh-grader Josette, to shop in Hoopdance while he takes Ottie to dialysis. The girls seek out a perfume to give to their mother as a Christmas gift. They select an expensive perfume called Eau Sauvage because it smells like LaRose's hair. Meanwhile, Peter Ravich does his best to keep his mind off the holidays by tending to his farm, but Christmas comes anyway. Neither family is happy about it but go through with the motions primarily for their children, such as setting up trees. Josette and Snow especially miss LaRose. Coochy asks Emmaline if she has made LaRose his annual pair of moccasins. Emmaline says she has. Landreaux later visits with his friend Randall, who runs sweat lodges and teaches Ojibwe culture, history, and deer skinning at the tribal high school. Randall tells Landreaux that Landreaux has demons. Landreaux thinks it is because his family hates him for LaRose. Randall tells Landreaux he did the right thing, especially owing to Emmaline's ancestry, which can be traced to Mink.

Randall says LaRose is strong, will be fine, and has a kind of understanding that defies the average person's understanding. Randall encourages Landreaux, who is now crying, to put his pain into energy used to care for his family. At the same time, Emmaline wonders about taking LaRose back. Emmaline makes an attempt to visit Nola and LaRose, but Nola refuses to answer the door. Nola and Peter have been



drifting apart, with Nola being angered by the thought of having another child as Peter suggests. The stray dog that has been hanging around arrives at Peter's house, and Peter lets the dog in as a member of the family. Meanwhile, Father Travis receives a call about the diocese's new bishop, Florian Soreno, considered very conservative and approved of in the Republican-dominated state. Travis wonders how this will work for the Indian reservations, which are predominantly Democrat. Travis himself is a Republican, but has been able to get along well with the Indians.

In *The Passage*, the narrative returns to 1839. The daughter of Mink lies naked in the snow, asking for death to take her because she is sick of being taken advantage of by the "crafty old chimookoman (p. 62)." A pale blue person from the other world comes in, dresses her, wraps her in a new blanket, and tells her to call on him when next it happens, and she shall live. Back in the present, Nola is not happy at all with the new dog. Peter argues the dog loves life, obviously has a story, and deserves to be kept around. In February, Peter runs into Landreaux at Whitey's. With Nola and the kids away for the night, Peter invites Landreaux over. Landreaux accepts. They catch up on one another's lives, talk about things in general, and then finally come to the subject of Dusty. Landreaux and Peter scuffle, with Landreaux finally telling Peter to beat him up. Peter refuses, and the two settle back down. Nola and the kids visit with Mrs. Peace. LaRose goes through some old newspaper clippings, which include calls to exterminate the Indians. Mrs. Peace also has a conversation with her own mother in her head, in which she talks about the family plague of loneliness. It is hoped it will end with LaRose.

Father Travis holds Mass. Nola and Maggie are among those attending. He tells the account of how Saint Francis made peace between a wolf and a local village, which causes Maggie to think that sometimes, peace isn't always possible. Nola then smacks Maggie for not sitting still. One day, Peter's dog ends up at Landreaux's house. On his way to work, Landreaux drops the dog off at Peter's, at which time Peter asks Landreaux to come in. Peter says he knows he and the Irons had an agreement, but wants to know what the agreement is doing to LaRose. Peter says he knows LaRose is sad and misses his old family, but that Nola has come to deeply love LaRose. Peter says it would be best to have peace and share LaRose between the families. LaRose will now shift back and forth between both houses month by month. Nola takes the news well, but later explodes when trying to kill a mouse that has gotten into the house. Romeo, meanwhile, goes to the Dead Custer, a dive bar where Father Travis frequents to encourage people to attend church. Romeo sits down to talk with Travis. Romeo reveals he is rooting for John McCain in the 2000 Republican primaries. Travis encourages Romeo to come to church.

At the parish, Travis is later visited by Nola, who brings word of the new plan for LaRose. Nola says she doesn't know what she'd do to herself if LaRose was taken back. This alarms Travis, who fears Nola may be self-destructive. Nola denies this. Travis then asks how Nola has been treating Maggie, having seen the slap in church. Nola tells Travis to mind his own business or she'll tell people he tried to cop a feel. Travis mentions this threat to the janitor, Stan, in the hall, who acknowledges it. Travis then tells Nola it is not the first time someone has tried to falsely accuse him. Nola then breaks down in tears. The house in which Landreaux and Emmaline live was originally a



cabin built by their ancestors in 1846, but has since been extended. LaRose is thrilled to be returned home for the first month of the new arrangement. Josette and Snow cry with happiness, while Hollis and Coochy manfully high-five and welcome LaRose back. Meanwhile, Romeo sees about his normal routine, which consists of odd jobs and brief stints at different workplaces, but always comes back around to his funeral operations. Romeo crashes funerals for the food, and robs the home of the dead of prescription pills, which he then snorts.

## Analysis

“LaRose” is a contemporary novel of family and redemption by Louise Erdrich, which revolves around the intended and unwitting efforts of young LaRose Iron to heal his broken family following the tragic death of Dusty. The novel begins with the death of Dusty, as Landreaux is hunting deer along the border between his property, and the Raviches’. The shooting is unintentional; Landreaux did not know Dusty was behind the deer, and Landreaux was not drinking or on drugs at the time. Accidental though it was, Nola blames Landreaux for the killing, as does Landreaux himself. Landreaux is legally cleared of any wrongdoing, but Landreaux knows he cannot clear himself morally. While from a rational standpoint, Landreaux is not morally wrong, he feels morally responsible.

Landreaux slowly begins to withdraw from life –an understandable, though regrettable decision. Others warn Emmaline that she needs to keep an eye on Landreaux. Landreaux learns from others, including Ottie, that life cannot be given up on –even due to a tragedy. Nola, however, cannot (understandably) see things this way. That her son has been taken away from her is something that is evil, and something which she believes (at first) cannot be forgiven. But as the author explains through her set up of the plot (the death of Dusty), good and evil cannot always be so easily classified. The same is true of Romeo, who sometimes appears to be headed down the right track, but other times seems to be no good at all –such as when he robs the homes of the recently-deceased for prescription pills to snort. Romeo is somewhere in between good and evil, and has Father Travis acting as a force to pull him toward the good.

The death of Dusty brings into play the relationship between the living and the dead in society. Eighteenth Century British conservative philosopher Edmund Burke argued that society, made up of families, is a compact between the living, the dead, and the unborn, where the dead leave the present world to the living, who must then be good stewards of, and improve the world for those yet to come. Traditions, customs, practices, and beliefs are inherited from the dead, and are used in the present world and passed on to the next generation because they have, through experience, been proven to work. This is why, for Ojibwe tradition’s sake, LaRose is given to the Raviches to be raised by them. The author, as well as the character of Randall, argue that such traditions are essential because they are vital to family and to society, and the plot of the novel will bear this out with LaRose. The dead are presented through Wolford’s protection of the girl (whose name will be revealed to be LaRose in the future). The lives of the living can also be seen to be exchanged, as Dust dies instead of the deer, and a stray dog without a home is taken in by Peter. (The reader should bear this in mind for later chapters.)





It is ultimately decided that, while tradition must be upheld by the families, LaRose's feelings must also be taken into consideration. LaRose will now live month by month with each family, alternating between the two. Despite all of this, Landreaux still feels horrible about Dusty's death, and expects his own life will suffer tremendously as a result. He does not fear suffering, but expects it as punishment. Landreaux does not believe redemption is possible outside of some kind of atonement. Landreaux has his suffering in mind as the proper form of payment to a debt that may never be repaid. Both Ojibwe and Catholic tradition hold that forgiveness is possible, but it can only be given if asked for, and if the one asking is genuinely contrite. Landreaux, however, doesn't even have the heart to think about asking for forgiveness.

## Discussion Question 1

While it is clear that Landreaux's killing of Dusty is an accident, is Landreaux morally, if not legally, to be held to account for Dusty's death? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is LaRose given to the Raviches to raise? Why does Randall support this while Emmaline opposes this? How do Peter and Nola feel? Why?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Peter consent to allowing LaRose to live at home and with the Raviches on a month by month basis? Do you believe Peter is morally fair in having agreed to this? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

allotments, luminous, incomprehensible, rending, bewilderment, exquisite, reverently, mesmerizing, mystically, lolled, mawkish, indeterminate, melodrama, acquiesce, resonant, ravenous, oblique, intermittent, lucrative



## Pages 95 – 152

### Summary

Two Houses: 1999-2000 (continued)

In Hello, beauty, Nola comes to meet with Father Travis. While she waits, she notices a harmless garter snake, which she always seems to draw to her. The snake's nest is deep in the rocks of the area and always sneaks into houses. Nola calls the snake a beauty. Then, she begins to tell the snake her problems, such as realizing her relationship with Peter is now love-hate. Father Travis then enters his office, leaving the door to the hall open. He learns from Nola that Dusty had sneaked out of the house the day he was killed while she was attending to Maggie. Nola blames Maggie for what happened, though she knows that she should not. Father Travis tells her she cannot blame herself, either. Father Travis still worries about Nola's safety.

The novel then returns to 1839. Mink's daughter's father, Mashkiig, tries to claim and then buy the girl. Mackinnon and Wolfred refuse and prepare to defend the girl at gunpoint if necessary. Later over dinner, Wolfred notices that the girl's dress is torn in the back. The girl glances at Mackinnon, which tells Wolfred everything he needs to know.

In The Crossbeams, the summer comes on. Snow hates that the summer brings ticks and not being allowed to take the road to walk anywhere. The girls are both working at Whitey's now, where Old Whitey and his stepdaughter, London, run the place and treat the girls well. The girls head over to pick up LaRose. The name LaRose is the name of Mink's daughter, also known as Mirage, or Ombaniamagad. It is believed the name LaRose protects the owner from the unknown because bad luck rarely stops with one occurrence. Emmaline, however, is simply thrilled to have her son home at all. After delivering LaRose, Snow and Josette check each other for ticks. Emmaline brings LaRose to visit with Mrs. Peace and her friends, including Sam Eagleboy and Malvern Sangrait. Father Travis heads out to go running on the fitness trail. He thinks about how much he loves being the priest for the area. Travis also credits God with saving his life and keeping him alive for a reason. Travis's war injury, a horrible leg wound, is still getting better even years later. He finds himself thinking of Emmaline. Nola, meanwhile, considers ending her own life or killing Landreaux to get the release she believes she needs.

Meanwhile, Romeo is depressed because McCain has lost in the primary to George W. Bush. He speaks about it at the AA group that Father Travis heads up. Romeo decides he will use his fleece-throw routine to gain entry to the homes of elderly people as a cover for stealing medications from them, so that he can keep getting wasted until the general election is over. When he turns up at Mrs. Peace's, he is not expecting a room full of people. He pretends he is making a social visit, uses the bathroom, and steals some pills. At home, he takes them –and then realizes he has been duped. The pills



disorient them, give him stomach sickness, give him gas, and give him an erection. Romeo knows his tricks have been figured out. He wonders how he will regain respect on the reservation.

The novel returns to 1839. Wolfred thinks about how he can protect the girl. The girl picks poison, which Wolfred works into the food he prepares for Mackinnon. When the poison takes effect, Wolfred collects needed supplies from the trading post and leaves with the girl. They do leave supplies behind for Mackinnon so he does not die.

In *Almond Joy*, September comes on. LaRose begins attending school in a combined kindergarten-first-grade class, where a first grade bully named Dougie Veddar sets his sights on tormenting LaRose. This angers Maggie, who sets her sights on Dougie. Together with an older girl named Sarah, Maggie lures Dougie away from the other kids at recess with an Almond Joy. Maggie then kicks Dougie between the legs and warns him to leave her brother alone. She then smashes the Almond Joy down his throat, and makes sure LaRose is watching so he knows what revenge looks like. Maggie later gets in trouble at school for calling Miss Behring "Miss Boring," and is made to stand in the corner. There, she pretends to urinate in a cup, using apple juice to substitute for urine. She then asks to dump the cup, which shocks Miss Behring. Maggie then drinks the cup, shocking everyone. After Church on the weekend, Peter and Maggie go to visit the Iron house. Maggie explains to Josette and Snow that Dougie had to be taken care of for LaRose's own good while Josette and Snow do Maggie's nails. The novel returns to 1839. Wolfred and the girl travel south to Grand Portage, where they are joined by a dog. Mackinnon catches up. The girl uses a torch to thrust toward the sky to force Mackinnon to stop his pursuit in pain. This frightens and intrigues Wolfred. He asks the girl his name, but she will not say anything. She now controls Mackinnon's body like a puppet.

In *The Pain Chart*, a nurse reminds Mrs. Peace that her pain patches are very strong, and she must not allow anyone to take her spare. Mrs. Peace says that her mother will come and visit her. Maggie, meanwhile, is grabbed by a group of four kids – Tyler Veddar, Curtains Peace, Brad Morrissey, and Jason "Buggy" Wildstrand – who accuse her of trying to kill Dougie, and then proceed to put their hands all over her and in her clothes. She fights back and beats them all up. Tyler then asks her to be the frontman for their band, but Maggie refuses. She tells them that Landreaux, who killed Dusty, is her stepfather and will hunt down and kill anyone who ever touches her again. At home, Maggie gives beer to the dog and watches the dog get drunk. No matter how many showers she takes, Maggie cannot feel clean enough. LaRose recognizes something is wrong with Maggie, so he comforts her and tells her he will find a way to kill anyone who hurts her. Maggie calls herself a broken animal.

Meanwhile, Romeo, high as usual, plots revenge against Landreaux by vowing to get to the bottom of Dusty's killing. He decides this will be his ticket back to respect, and decides to clean himself up by going to the hospital. A year has now passed since the killing of Dusty. Both families come together to honor and remember Dusty. Landreaux finds that the buck he attempted to shoot is still alive and knows what happened. The deer, he believes, is a deer to another world where Dusty was never killed. LaRose later



tells Landreaux he has had a vision in which Dusty followed a dog into the woods before he was killed, and that Landreaux should ask the dog. LaRose also tells his father that Dusty has told him that Landreaux shot him on accident. This comforts Landreaux a little. He begins to reflect on being sent to a school run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs when he was nine. On the bus, he remembers noticing that someone had written “LaRose” repeatedly.

The novel jumps back to 1839. Wolfred and the girl continue to travel, constantly hounded by the burning head of Mackinnon. Wolfred tends to a winter shelter while the girl tends to their clothing and shoes. When Wolfred falls ill that night, the girl cares for him. Wolfred tells her to leave him behind, but she refuses. When he awakens, Wolfred finds the girl tuning a drum she says flew to her. She begins to play the drum and sing, helping Wolfred to recover. Wolfred asks the girl's name once more, but she only draws a flower. He then asks the girl if she will marry him when she grows up. She agrees. As they pass the Great Lakes, they take company with some Presbyterian missionaries who offer the girl a chance to attend school. The girl agrees, but does not realize this means she will be indentured to the school, for she has no family and no tuition. While at school, the girl keeps in touch with Wolfred by letter. Meanwhile, Wolfred protects the girl and himself by saying he and the girl went away for help, not to escape Mackinnon. The locals accept this, and believe Mackinnon's body was later ripped apart by dogs. Wolfred learns about the ways of the Indians so he may be a better husband, while the girl is learning how to be white.

## Analysis

The author continues to argue that good and evil are not always easily discerned. The knowledge that Nola draws snakes to her –with snakes in the Catholic tradition being seen as a mark of the Devil, while snakes in the Ojibwe tradition being seen as both good and evil –represents not outright evil, but misfortune and bad luck. At the same time, the reader learns that the 1839 rescuing of the first LaRose from her mother is both a blessing and a curse. It has gotten the girl away from her horrible parents –but has exposed her to being raped by Mackinnon. Yet, at the same time, it also makes Wolfred her protector. Wolfred escapes with the girl, who in turn comes to save Wolfred's life. It is clear the girl is a defender of justice and a progenitor of goodness. Here, good and evil are easily discerned between the lecherous Mackinnon, and the pure-hearted LaRose. Only goodness comes from the care LaRose and Wolfred have demonstrated for one another, as they agree to be married when LaRose is old enough and returns from her education at school.

It is through the first LaRose and the LaRose of the present day that the name LaRose is noted as an omen of good and salvation for the family, a ward against bad luck. Just as Wolfred saved his LaRose, LaRose saved him as well. In the present, LaRose seeks to defend Maggie, who he now considers to be a sister, especially after Maggie was sexually abused by Tyler Vedder and his friends. LaRose is already living up to his name –though he has no idea yet how he will exact revenge on those who have wrong someone who has come to mean so much to him, especially because it is a direct



consequence of Maggie having defended him in the first place. The past –and experience –have come to have a direct influence on the living, as the author continues to expound. As LaRose reveals to Landreaux, Dusty himself does not hold Landreaux responsible for his death, saying Landreaux’s killing (the act itself) was an accident. However, the death may have been preordained.

At the same time, the author argues that the past is what it is, and cannot be undone. Landreaux has, on many occasions so far, wished he could go back in time to undo the past. Landreaux returns, heartbroken and devastated, to the scene of Dusty’s killing repeatedly. On one such visit, he encounters the deer. The reader will remember both the deer and the dog from the previous chapters, as well as the hope that the current LaRose will be the last one to bear the family curse of loneliness and bad luck. Landreaux comes to believe the deer was a pathway between the present world and the next. For Landreaux, it is because he wishes the deer to be the pathway to a world where Dusty was never killed. Yet, the past cannot be changed into something it never was. But taken together with the fact that the stray dog –which has mysteriously shown up –was followed by Dusty to the place where his life was exchanged for the deer’s, it is only possible to conclude that Dusty was meant to leave the present world for a reason. Landreaux was simply the unwitting method for this preordained exchange.

At first, the results of Dusty’s death are seemingly only awful. Two families, connected by the half-sisters Emmaline and Nola, are thrown into chaos by the death. However, as time passes, Maggie and LaRose become very close, and consider one another to be siblings. At the same time, Josette, Snow, and Maggie begin to warm up to one another in ways not previously known, all because Maggie had the kindness and courage to stick up for LaRose. However, just as the reader begins to see a redemptive, healing process begin to emerge from Dusty’s death, so too can a challenge to this be seen. This comes through the form of Romeo, who is determined to bring Landreaux down at any cost, and to use Dusty’s killing as a way to achieve it. He is determined to find a way to prove the killing was not an accident, for he holds Landreaux responsible not only for supposedly stealing Emmaline, but for the injuries he sustained as a child which led to a lifetime of addiction. This will be seen in the coming section of the novel.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Romeo intend to use Dusty’s death to his own advantage? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

How has Dusty’s death affected the family one year out from its occurring? Who continues to seem to be most troubled by the death? Why?



## Discussion Question 3

What evidence suggests that Dusty's killing was not an accident per se, but preordained? Why does this information matter?

## Vocabulary

innumerable, undiluted, nonchalantly, placate, machismo, simultaneous, sonorous, proximity, spasmodic, luxuriate, implacable, indentured, arduous



# Pages 153 – 226

## Summary

Take it All: 1967 – 1970

In *Romeo and Landreaux*, Landreaux works to adjust to life at the Bureau school at Fort Totten, where he has Romeo for a roommate. Romeo comes to look up to Landreaux because Landreaux always seems to know how to handle things, including being away at school. Landreaux and Romeo learn about a girl who had sneaked back into the bus to go back home. They consider trying this. They sneak aboard a bus. At a rest stop, take over a car whose family has left the keys in the ignition. After driving so many miles, they leave the car and set off across the countryside on foot. They come to a tidy farmhouse with a dog named Pepperboy. The dog's owner, an old woman, invites the boys in for food. She allows them to spend the night. The owner's son, Ceel, comes to visit the next morning, checking to see how his mother is doing and angry that she has chosen to continue sleeping on the couch. When Ceel leaves, Landreaux and Romeo venture out. They learn that the woman's husband is dead and that the couple had settled on land purchased from Romeo's mother and father back in 1912. The woman sadly tells how her son wants to sell everything the family had worked so hard to build. The woman sends the boys on their way with over a thousand dollars, water, and food. The boys continue west by following the railroad tracks.

They board a bus and go to Minneapolis. Amazed by the size and scope of the city, they camp out under a rail bridge on a piling, far above a camp of homeless people. Landreaux and Romeo pass their days stealing food and going to the movies. Eventually, the camp of people below (including an Indian with a Kung Fu moustache) catches them sneaking around. They allow the boys to stay because they are on the run from the Indian school. Asleep that night, Landreaux almost rolls off the piling. Romeo tries to catch him, but both boys fall. The homeless below tend to the injured boys. Romeo's leg and arm are broken, but the homeless will not take him to a doctor. Instead, they decide to pump Romeo full of whiskey for the pain. Landreaux runs away to hail down a policeman. When the police arrive at the bridge, the homeless have gone. Landreaux begs the police to find Romeo. Landreaux is sent back to school while Romeo is taken to Hennepin County Medical Center where he is later found.

Wolfred and LaRose

In *The Old One*, the novel returns to the 1830s. The girl LaRose's school is hit by a bout of tuberculosis, the ancient illness. The girl returns to the town of Saint Anthony after being away for six years, where Wolfred is waiting for her. He and the girl are thrilled to see one another again. As they drive through the prairie, the girl pulls Wolfred close. The two make love in the grass. Wolfred builds a cabin on land that he has purchased. The cabin will one day serve as the center of the large house of their descendants. Wolfred and LaRose marry, make love frequently, and have four children which they



name Patrice, Cuthbert, Cleophile, and LaRose. The children are raised to be capable members of both the white and the Ojibwe society. For more than a decade, Wolfred helps his wife battle bouts of tuberculosis. Eventually, it overwhelms her. Wolfred brings LaRose to see Doctor Haniford Ames in Saint Paul. Ames admits her to a treatment program. Since LaRose might not live, she spends her time writing letters, stories, and warnings to her children about life. Ames himself had once been plagued with the disease, he explains, but he had managed to survive. He does not know why exactly, but he has devoted his life to finding out why through helping others survive.

LaRose begins to recover, but then she writes home that she has seen a vision of Mackinnons' fiery head. This causes Wolfred to rush out to see her. By the time he arrives, however, LaRose has died, her spirit having ascended into the sky. LaRose is heartbroken, never remarries, remains in love with LaRose, and commits himself to caring for their children. The youngest LaRose takes after her mother, having been taught by her mother to find guardian spirits in the world, how to live off the land, how to sew, cook, weave, and so on. The young LaRose is sent to Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, for a traditional education. She becomes well-educated and graceful in Western ways. LaRose returns home, determined that her own future children will be well-grounded in the ways of whites and Indians. Her namesake daughter becomes the mother of Mrs. Peace. She passes along their love and respect for Ojibwe and American culture and education.

1,000 Kills: 2002 – 2003

In *The Letters*, Mrs. Peace and Josette go through old letters written by Wolfred Roberts seeking the return of his stolen wife. His daughter, LaRose, continued the search in letters, for Ames had taken her mother's bones on the road in his lecture circuit in his quest to cure tuberculosis. Yet, even from Ames, the bones disappeared. Josette finds this strange. Meanwhile, LaRose lies down on the spot where Dusty was killed to commune with the spirit world. He falls asleep and awakens to find about twenty people arrayed around him. Among them is Dusty, and he and LaRose commence playing with action figures while the adult spirits talk among themselves. At the same time, Hollis has just turned eighteen and is ordering a beer at the Dead Custer when Romeo comes in. Hollis, it is revealed, is actually Romeo's son. Hollis explains he is set to join the National Guard. Romeo is stunned by this, because the National Guard represents the America that has pushed back the Indians. Romeo understands this, but wants to move beyond it and do something meaningful with his life. In exchange, he will learn skills that will set him up for work after military service. Romeo figures it is only a matter of time before the United States invades Iraq. Hollis asks about his mother, but all Romeo will say is that Hollis would not exist if his mother had not been doing drugs. After Romeo leaves, he considers it a betrayal that Hollis does not want to live with him. He then begins taking painkillers for his leg and his arm, blaming Landreaux for his addiction. He is determined to find a way to bring Landreaux down.

In *The Green Chair*, late summer comes on. Maggie is now thirteen, and angry that her breasts have not yet developed. Maggie goes for a long walk and comes upon what she believes to be a drug house, with her mother's car parked in the driveway. She climbs a





tree to watch the house, during which time an owl scratches her and Maggie becomes the owl. She does not find her mother or anyone in the house. She goes into the barn. There, she finds her mother preparing to hang herself by stepping off a green chair. Maggie talks Nola down, promising to never tell. Nola comes down, seeing the authority of the owl in her daughter. Maggie throws up constantly for the next two days, sickened by what almost happened. Meanwhile, Hollis officially enlists with the National Guard. Maggie later goes with LaRose to the lilac bush cave, which is their hideout. Maggie tells LaRose about Nola's suicide attempt. Maggie asks for help. LaRose says he knows what to do, even though he does not know.

## Analysis

Louise Erdrich continues to argue that the past remains the same past and cannot be undone. This is accomplished through the backstory of friendship that once existed between Landreaux and Romeo, in which the two sought to skip out and run away from boarding school. The boys were best friends, but the misadventure resulted in the breaking and shattering of Romeo's arm and leg. This in turn led to a lifelong addiction to painkillers, alcohol, and drugs –and the act of enduring these injuries while trying to save Landreaux leaves a bad feeling in Romeo, because he believes Landreaux has never been grateful enough for the sacrifice. While the details of how Emmaline ended up with Landreaux are unclear, what is clear is that Emmaline was never actually with Romeo. Nevertheless, Romeo –for his own bad choices and decisions –wants to blame how he has turned out on Landreaux, so he is determined still to find a way to bring Landreaux down using the body of Dusty to do so.

Dusty's killing –itself now a part of the past –continues to haunt both the Irons and the Raviches. However, it bless them in other ways. Nola is still understandably stricken by grief, but the dark loneliness and sadness she has experienced has grown to such a point that she is now suicidal. Maggie relates this fear to the young LaRose, who –living up to his namesake without realizing it –vows to help in whatever way he can, even though he has no idea yet what he will do. This is contrasted with Wolfred's futile attempts to treat his own LaRose through Dr. Ames's regimen –and the tragedy of her eventual death due to tuberculosis back in the 1800s. Just as Nola is haunted by Dusty's death, so too is Nola haunted by her son's death, and so too is Maggie haunted by the fear of her mother's death. Meanwhile, the families are growing closer together, evidenced especially by Maggie's confiding in LaRose. These two have decided that they must move beyond the past –just as Hollis has decided that he must move beyond the distant past of war between whites and Indians as well by joining the National Guard.

It is through Hollis that Erdrich's insistence on the importance of tradition is examined. Romeo has recognized that he could never properly raise a son he wasn't prepared to have in the first place, so he gave up Hollis to be raised by the Irons –and because he is still in love with Emmaline. Romeo, though he supports the Republicans and considers himself an American, still cannot get over the past between whites and Indians. The tradition that Indians and whites have more in common than they do not is also upheld –



between not only intermarriage, but in Hollis's insistence on doing good in life for everyone, regardless as to who they are. This is also upheld in the Iron family tradition that children be raised with a strong respect for, and footing in, both Ojibwe and American culture, ensuring they will be competent citizens in both worlds –worlds which at the end of the day have far more in common than not. This is the wisdom of the dead being passed down to the living, who continue to pass it on to future generations.

Through all of these events, the author again upholds her argument that good and evil are not always so easily defined. The Indian Wars between whites and Indians were not always blameless on either side, yet Landreaux (himself a veteran) and Hollis have demonstrated the desire to move beyond the past. Romeo, though certainly a scoundrel, is not found to be evil, but merely deeply flawed. His insistence on what the past should have been, as well as his refusal to own up to responsibility and his desire to bring down Landreaux, are contrasted with his desire to do the right thing as a father. This plays out against the backdrop of the impending Iraq War, which some Americans consider to be a good and just war and some believe to be unjust and evil. Others believe the truth to be somewhere in between.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Romeo hold Landreaux responsible for the way that Romeo's life has turned out? Do you believe Romeo is right in blaming Landreaux for this? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

In what ways does Dusty's death continue to affect both families negatively? In which ways does Dusty's death affect the family positively? How do these effects either support or oppose the idea that Dusty's death may have been preordained?

## Discussion Question 3

How do the Iron family, Hollis, and Romeo approach the past? What do you believe accounts for their different approaches?

## Vocabulary

opacity, toothily, preternatural, dormant, tuberculosis, immaculate, curative, adamant, admonitions, judicious, petrified, fervently, formidable, filial



# Pages 227 – 302

## Summary

1,000 Kills: 2002 – 2003 (continued)

In *The Letters* (continued), LaRose gives Maggie a small rock he has collected, but Maggie throws it down, saying collecting rocks will not help. LaRose does his best to reassure Maggie that everything will be alright. Two nights later, LaRose suddenly awakens and goes into the bathroom to assess the pills behind the mirror. He throws out poisonous pills and hides Peter's pack of razor blades. He also secretly begins to clear out the knives in the house. He then removes the bullets from Peter's gun. Then, he throws out pesticides, rat poisons, bleach, and rope. Hollis begins to attend National Guard classes, all the while thinking about Josette, with whom he is falling in love. It is clear to him that Josette also wants him, but he refuses to make a move out of respect for the family. Emmaline calls Peter, realizing she can no longer stand the trading of LaRose back and forth. Peter begs for more time, but Emmaline cannot bear it anymore. Nola believes that Emmaline is doing this to spite her, and she announces to Maggie that LaRose is being kept against his will. Maggie reminds Nola that she and Peter love her. Maggie then makes hot chocolate for herself and her mother. Her mother drinks the hot cocoa in one gulp, burning her insides. Maggie scrambles to get her mother cold milk to follow it down. Maggie tries, but refuses to say she is sorry for not being able to fix her mother, for saving her mother's life in the barn, sorry for being sorry, and so on. Maggie goes to visit Josette and Snow, who teach her the fundamentals of volleyball. Maggie then asks Peter if she can change schools to attend the same school as Josette, Snow, and LaRose, and so she can play volleyball. Peter says he will speak to Nola about it.

Romeo and Father Travis watch CNN at Dead Custer. A case is being built for war against Iraq, Romeo explains. He worries the National Guard may be sent into such a war. Father Travis feels anxious. Emmaline later asks him if he is alright, and Father Travis says he is fine even though Emmaline can see something is bothering him. Travis knows by now he has feelings for Emmaline, but will not act on them because he is a priest, and because she is married. He knows he must endure the test, and keep to his duties. Out with LaRose, Emmaline explains he will no longer have to go back and forth between the houses, but will stay with her, permanently. LaRose does not mind the switching, even though it gets old. He explains he is mostly worried about Maggie and Nola, with Nola being suicidal. This causes Emmaline to consider her son a little man. Emmaline agrees to let LaRose continue moving back and forth between the houses, sad, proud, and overwhelmed by LaRose's maturity. Landreaux later drives LaRose over to the Ravich house where Maggie excitedly greets him.

At her new school, Josette and Snow introduce Maggie to many of the other kids as their sister, doing their best to make sure Maggie fits in quickly. They introduce her to a boy named Waylon and a girl named Diamond, both of whom are in class with Snow



and Maggie. That Saturday, Josette, Snow, and Maggie head to volleyball tryouts with Coach Duke. The girls trying out are a blend of Indians, whites, and mixes. Maggie does very well at tryouts, and makes the varsity team. That week, Landreaux works on laying pipe at Randall's sweat lodge. Ottie chats with him while he works, asking Landreaux where he first met Emmaline. Landreaux explains it was at Eddieboy's funeral wake, and got to know each other at first by writing letters. Now, Landreaux feels as if he cannot exist without her. October comes on. Emmaline, Josette, Snow, Maggie, and LaRose give themselves facial treatments, and make LaRose participate as well. Later, Maggie and Snow explain that their mother, like Nola, favors LaRose over everyone else. They tell Maggie not to worry about this, because they have Maggie covered.

Mrs. Peace invites Emmaline and other friends over. Ignatia explains that she has a story to tell, but cannot tell it until the legless beings are asleep. Romeo, meanwhile, takes on the janitorial night shift at the local IHS EMT station where he can listen in on gossip about people in the area –including Landreaux. Up late with Maggie, LaRose asks her what boys did bad things to her with their fingers. She reveals them to be Tyler Veddar, Curtains Peace, Brad Morrissey, and Jason “Buggy” Wildstrand. LaRose says he will take revenge against them. LaRose is not very worried because he works out with Father Travis and has a green belt. With the return of LaRose, Nola begins to feel better, and decides to go back to work with Peter at the Cenex gas station. They grow closer together as the days pass. Nola listens to LaRose playing with the spirit of Dusty, which compels Nola to late burns the green chair in the family fire pit. She feels as if she has finally overcome the darkness inside her, knowing that her son is alive and safe on the other side. Romeo listens to the news, and listens to Senator McCain press the case for war with Iraq. Romeo trusts McCain completely, that war is the right thing to do.

Father Travis, who believes in God, thinks about his conceptions of God. For example, as a child, he considered God a kind protector. During military service, he considered God to be very far away and moving in mysterious ways. Travis cannot sleep because he is expecting a call from Bishop Soreno. In the morning, the call comes in. Travis, who has put in a request for transfer, is approved. Emmaline is stunned by this when she finds out, and asks why. Travis says it is because he is in love with her. Emmaline begins to cry, and says it is not fair. LaRose, in the meantime, seeks out where he can find Tyler Veddar and his high school friends. Tyler and the others still talk about what they did to Maggie, except Brad because Brad is not happy about his past behavior. LaRose asks Hollis where Tyler and his friends hang out, but won't say why he is asking. This makes Hollis suspicious. Meanwhile, Peter and Nola become impressed with Maggie's commitment to volleyball. Landreaux continues to drive Ottie to dialysis. Although Ottie says it isn't much of a life, it is still life, and he has his wife to think about.

With the legless ones sleeping, Ignatia finally tells her story, a story of existence. A man lives with his wife and two children on a hill. Each day, the man goes hunting. One day, he sees his wife dressing in all her best clothes and imagines she is preparing herself for him. When he returns, she is wearing normal clothes again. This happens the next day as well. So on the third day, the man waits to see what his wife does. She makes love to a snake that comes out of a tree. The next day, the man says he has killed a bear. He has his wife go cut the meat up. The man then goes to the tree and kills the



snake and turns the snake into soup which is wife eats upon her return home. She compliments the meal. The husband then explains its contents. The wife rushes to the tree and discovers her husband is telling the truth. When she returns home, the husband cuts off her head. The head then tries to chase after her children, who throw down fire, mountains, and a beaver with iron teeth to stop her. They throw down a river and are ferried across by the Great Serpent. The mother's head demands to be carried across, but it is submerged in the water and made a sturgeon instead. Of the two children, the younger brother becomes a wolf, and he and his older brother create the first humans. LaRose asks for the moral of the story. It is explained to LaRose that Indian stories do not have morals, but deeper meanings. The story is about getting chased in life, such as by what people do to other people.

At home, when Landreaux discovers Josette and Snow slapping each other, he stops them from fighting. Josette is angry because Snow says Josette likes Hollis. Snow says there is no DNA shared between Snow and Hollis, so Snow should pursue Hollis. LaRose, meanwhile, confronts Tyler and his friends. He punches Tyler in the face, which barely affects Tyler. LaRose says it is for Maggie. Buggy slaps LaRose so hard LaRose falls to the ground. Brad intervenes, and decides to bring LaRose home. He tells LaRose that it is awesome how he defended Maggie. LaRose then knife-hands Brad's nose, bloodying it. At school, Waylon comes to develop a crush on Maggie. Maggie explains that Tyler and his friends, the "Fearsome Four" have bothered her before. This makes Waylon become protective of Maggie. Peter and Nola receive good reports about Maggie during parent-teacher conference night, which makes Peter and Nola very happy. Peter realizes, at last, that things seem as though they will be alright.

## Analysis

Romeo continues on in his quest to find a way to bring Landreaux down. He uses his work at Indian Health Services to snoop around and get into gossip and records relating to Dusty's death. As this occurs, LaRose commits himself to ensure that Nola does not experience death at all. He journeys around the Ravich household, removing anything dangerous or poisonous that Nola may use to kill herself. Of particular note to the reader is that Romeo removes the bullets from Peter's hunting rifles. While seemingly inconsequential against being seen as only part of a wide array of poisons and dangers, the removal of the bullets will indeed have profound consequences in the future. LaRose, through the removal of such poisons and dangers in pursuit of life, continues to live up to his namesake.

Meanwhile, the families continue to grow closer. Though Emmaline wants to stop allowing LaRose to move back and forth between the houses, she consents to allowing it to continue to happen because she knows it is for the best. Maggie goes out of her way to ask to attend school with Josette and Snow, for the three girls have grown so close they now consider one another sisters. This is best demonstrated at school, where Josette and Snow introduce Maggie to everyone as their sister, and introduce everyone to Maggie so that Maggie will fit in quickly and will feel welcome quickly. This also can be seen through their desire to get Maggie on the volleyball team with them.



When all three girls recognize that their parents value LaRose over any of them, they take comfort in knowing that they have each other.

This is a level of closeness between the three girls that did not exist prior to Dusty's death. At the same time, Nola is finally able to move beyond her darkness—a darkness which existed in small form before Dusty's death—when she learns that LaRose is able to communicate with Dusty on the other side. To know that Dusty is safe, free, and well gives Nola great hope, and frees her from being dragged down by the past. That Dusty should commune with the living is further proof of the importance of family, of society, being in a compact with the dead to whom the look for answers, for comfort, and for wisdom. Peter, too, begins to realize that life will end up alright—with all of this stemming from the catalyst of Dusty's death, with Dusty now belonging to the citizenry of the dead.

Despite all these good things that have occurred, Landreaux still wishes he could go back in time to change the past. Erdrich continues to argue that the past is the past, and cannot be undone. What the dead give to the living, they must take and make better. Dusty's death, preordained by God but unwittingly carried out by Landreaux, is something both families have now more or less overcome. As demonstrated by the story told by Ignatia during a gathering at Mrs. Peace's, life chases after people. The past remains with people constantly. They can either make peace with it and move on, or they can be swallowed up by it. From all appearances, the Irons and the Raviches appear to be doing just that—while Romeo has been unable to step outside himself, and move beyond the past.

## Discussion Question 1

How has Dusty's death come to affect Josette, Snow, and Maggie? Why do the girls take comfort in one another?

## Discussion Question 2

While the Iron and Ravich families have begun the process of moving beyond the past—and seem very near having fully done so—Romeo remains stuck in the past. Why do you believe this is?

## Discussion Question 3

What is meant by the story that Ignatia tells during a gathering at Mrs. Peace's? How does this traditional Ojibwe story relate to the wider events surrounding Dusty's death, and life in general?

## Vocabulary

scalding, outcast, tedious, humanitarian, plaintive, malic, sacred, subverting, havoc, immaterial, eloquent, mitigate



## Pages 303 – 372

### Summary

1,000 Kills: 2002 – 2003 (continued)

In *The Letters* (continued), Peter and Nola attend Maggie's volleyball games. Nola worries that Maggie is so small compared to the other girls, who are very tall. They come alive cheering for Maggie during the game, which causes a trucker to become angry with Nola for standing up so much. When he puts his hands on Nola, Peter punches him out. Meanwhile, on the court, Maggie smashes a girl on the other team in the face with a volleyball, earning a yellow card. The girl whom Maggie smashes is the trucker's daughter. Peter and Nola are ordered out of the game by the referee. Emmaline and Landreaux, also at the game, follow to keep them company.

As the days pass, Father Travis wonders why he ever confessed his love to Emmaline. Still, he continues to teach LaRose karate. LaRose finally confesses that he wants to beat up the boys who hurt Maggie. Father Travis says he himself will handle the situation. As March, 2003, comes, the War in Iraq begins. Josette believes the war is all about oil. Peter calls Braelyn's father to apologize for the fight. Wildstrand also apologizes. Emmaline goes to Grand Forks for a conference, where she meets up with and sleeps with Travis.

As spring continues, Maggie pushes her father to get family photos done. Peter agrees, calling himself a lucky man for the family that he has. While at Alco for their photographs, Peter is approached by Romeo, who is still furious at Landreaux. Romeo pulls Peter aside and says he gained access to the coroner's report. Romeo shows that Dusty bled to death while Landreaux was calling for help and restraining Nola from running out. Romeo then goes on to say that "the guys" have speculated that Landreaux's judgment had been impaired. Romeo gives Peter the report, saying Dusty could have been saved. After the photos, Peter picks up Landreaux and tells Landreaux they are going hunting even though it is not hunting season. Peter confronts Landreaux with the report, but Landreaux says he was not high or drunk. He also goes on to say that he still wishes he could undo that day. Out in the woods, Peter says he is going to find a stand and brings along his rifle. He tells Landreaux to start uphill, then come downhill toward him. Landreaux realizes what is going to happen and believes his punishment has finally come.

Meanwhile, Romeo is pleased with himself. At the AA meeting with Father Travis, where only Travis and Romeo are in attendance, Romeo announces that he wasn't always a scumbag, that he once was an intelligent kid who was led astray by Landreaux, and that Landreaux stole Emmaline away from him. He goes on to announce that Dusty would have lived had he not bled to death due to Landreaux's impairment, phone call, and restraining Nola. Father Travis looks at a copy of the report, and tells Romeo that his version of events doesn't match the reality of the report, that has taken facts that don't





add up and created a lie from them. Romeo tells Father Travis he explained it all to Peter at Alco. Father Travis quickly goes to Peter's house, where he learns that Peter has gone out with his best hunting rifle. Meanwhile, Waylon and Maggie head out into a field to slice and hoe for a date. Maggie removes her shirt and works only in her bra, which mesmerizes Waylon. She then brings Waylon into the woods by an old oak tree and coaxes him into having sex with her. Father Travis then arrives at Emmaline's, and asks where Peter and Landreaux would go hunting. She tells him to head west to Federal land.

As Landreaux appears before Peter, Peter fires the gun –but nothing happens. Peter suddenly realizes that the bullets have been removed by LaRose during his period of concern for Nola. Peter now realizes LaRose has saved him as well as Landreaux. Landreaux continues walking, and is picked up on the side of the road by Father Travis –who is both relieved that Landreaux is alive, and who laughs at himself for thinking he might have a life with Emmaline with Landreaux dead. Father Travis drops Landreaux off at home, then forces Peter to read the report, explaining that what Romeo said was a lie. At this point, the new priest, Father Richard “Dick” Bohner, arrives. Father Travis then packs to leave, knowing he is in love with a woman he can never have. He takes with him a blouse given to him by Emmaline.

### The Gathering

In You Go, Josette and Snow want to give Hollis a proper graduation party. Josette heads over to see Nola about how to make a proper lawn, but Nola has gone to town so Maggie invites Josette in for some ice cream. It is the first time Josette has ever been inside. They grab some ice cream, then head back outside. As planning for the party continues, Hollis asks if he can invite his dad. Josette says it is okay to do so, and that he has already been sent an invitation. Hollis asks to keep an invitation for the memory of everything, which Josette happily agrees to. Meanwhile, Josette and Snow interest the Pluto Historical Society into looking into the case of the first LaRose's missing body. Josette and Snow then commit to creating a bead medallion, though Josette does not say who the medallion is for. It is later admitted the medallion is for Hollis. Mrs. Peace steps in to lend a hand. Josette and Snow later pay a visit to Maggie, to remind her that she needs to use protection when having sex with Waylon. They encourage use of the pill and use of condoms together.

Work on the graduation party continues. The lawn is cleaned up, and chairs and tables are put out. Decorations are put up, and food is prepared. The guest arrive and celebrate, toasting Hollis and wishing him luck in the future. Among those in attendance are Peter, Nola, and Maggie. Neither Peter, nor Landreaux, have ever spoken about the near murder of Landreaux, allowing it to remain in the past. Romeo also arrives, feeling like a ghost, and like everything has changed. He finds it odd that so many Indians are now fighting for the flag they once fought against; and he is amazed to see Peter and Landreaux getting along after what he almost did to them. Romeo also considers that letting Hollis go to live with Emmaline and her family in the first place was the right thing to do, because Hollis has turned out well. As the celebration continues, Maggie brings Waylon into the woods to have sex with him again. LaRose is given the honor of



blessing the food, then makes an offering of food to Dusty, telling Dusty he and the dead are invited. Romeo then reveals his gift to Hollis –a checking account with three-thousand dollars so Hollis can get his life underway. Josette asks Hollis if he will quit the National Guard now, but Hollis says he has signed papers. He then understands Josette's voice is now the voice of a woman.

## Analysis

Unable to let go of the past, Romeo continues in his efforts to bring Landreaux down and to derail the merging together of the Iron and Ravich families that has been occurring. He does this by presenting the coroner's report to Peter, telling Peter that Dusty could have been saved. When Father Travis later confronts Romeo about this, the reader learns through Father Travis that Romeo invented a false narrative based on picked facts that fit Romeo's desire to expose Landreaux. Severely humbled, Romeo comes to feel badly about what he has done, and is very surprised when he later receives an invitation to Hollis's graduation party.

However, the dissent that Romeo successfully sows nearly results in the death of Landreaux. Landreaux consigns himself to his fate, knowing that he has it coming after what happened to Dusty. However, Peter's attempt to kill Landreaux fails –because LaRose has removed the bullets from Peter's guns. Peter instantly recognizes he was about to make a huge mistake, and realizes that LaRose has not only saved Landreaux's life, but has saved Peter's own life as well. While Landreaux accidentally killed Dusty, Peter himself would have been guilty of outright murder if LaRose had not unwittingly intervened earlier in the novel (as the reader will recall).

The past is finally put away in the present. This is demonstrated through the graduation party where multiple generations of both families, as well as friends, attend. Erdrich once again argues the Burkean point that life, that family, that society, are all a compact between the living, the dead, and the unborn. The dead are among those who attend the party of the living, which in turn is constantly preparing to turn over the world to future generations. This is noted in the graduation of Hollis, who seeks to make a change in the world in a very big way by joining the National Guard.

The coming together of these families was only made possible by Dusty's death, which in turn has destroyed the family curse of bad luck and loneliness. The past has been moved past, and so redemption and forgiveness have been had –not only for Landreaux, but for Romeo as well. On a sad note, the present must become the past for Father Travis, who must force himself to move on because of his romantic love for Emmaline. While the families may have been brought together through Dusty's death, there is still some lingering sadness that Dusty is dead at all –but this is normal. In keeping with the conservative idea that the dead matter to the living, Dusty and the spirits of other ancestors attend the graduation party, to see life in transition from one generation to the next.



## Discussion Question 1

Why is Peter unable to kill Landreaux? When this occurs, what are Peter's realizations? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

Despite Romeo's role in nearly getting Landreaux killed, he is still invited to Hollis's graduation party. Why?

## Discussion Question 3

In what ways is Hollis's graduation party a demonstration of the covenant between the dead, the living, and the unborn? Why does this matter so much to the idea of family and society?

## Vocabulary

affable, sylph, exhilarated, vocation, notoriously, corroboration, verdant, studiously, macabre, laboriously



# Characters

## LaRose

LaRose Iron is the youngest child of Landreaux and Emmaline Iron. He is the brother of Hollis, Coochy, Josette, and Snow. He is also the namesake of the LaRoses in the Iron family. LaRose is five when the novel begins and about nine or ten when the novel ends. He is deeply pensive and able to commune with the dead directly. He becomes a savior to both his family and the Ravich family after Dusty is killed.

LaRose is sent to live with the Raviches. Ultimately, he is shared between the families. As he spends time with both families, he slowly brings them together in spite of the tragedy of Dusty. LaRose wants to protect and soothe the pains of all those around him.

LaRose, seeking to help the newfound sister he has in Maggie, removes all of the dangerous things from the Ravich house –including bullets from Peter’s gun. This spares both families from a tragedy, in which Peter –fueled by lies from Romeo –is unable to kill Landreaux because his gun has no bullets in it. As the novel ends, LaRose invites the spirits of Dusty and the dead ancestors to Hollis’s graduation party.

## Landreaux

Landreaux Iron is the father of LaRose, Josette, Snow, and Coochy and the husband of Emmaline. Landreaux, a veteran who now works in healthcare, is devastated when he accidentally kills Dusty. He holds himself accountable for Dusty’s death, even though he is cleared of all wrongdoing. Landreaux carries around the guilt for the killing for years, expecting that sooner or later, he will have to pay the price for it. Meanwhile, he attempts to reassure his wife and LaRose as LaRose is first sent to live with, and then traded back and forth with, the Raviches in compensation for the death of Dusty. Landreaux is later nearly killed by Peter when Romeo, seeking revenge against Landreaux for supposedly stealing Emmaline and causing him injury during their school days, fills Peter’s head with lies about Dusty’s death. Landreaux survives and recommits to caring for his family and to bringing it and the Raviches closer together.

## Emmaline

Emmaline Iron is the mother of LaRose, Josette, Snow, and Coochy. She is the wife of Landreaux. She is also the half-sister of Nola Ravich. Emmaline is a kind, pretty, a devout Catholic, and devoted mother and wife. Emmaline is saddened by the death of Dusty, but even more devastated by having to share LaRose with the Raviches. Eventually, Emmaline comes to accept things as they must be because LaRose is the traditional savior of the family. He is doing good things by bringing both families together.



## Peter

Peter Ravich is the father of Dusty and Maggie and the husband of Nola. Peter is devastated by the death of his son, but he reminds himself the death was accidental even though he is furious with Landreaux for it happening at all. Nevertheless, Peter does his best to get along with Landreaux because he knows how deeply sorry Landreaux is, and because he knows the killing was not intentional. Over time, Peter grows close again with the Irons, until Romeo fills his head with lies about the death of Dusty. Peter then attempts to kill Landreaux, but is unable because the bullets have been removed from his gun by LaRose, worried about Nola committing suicide using a gun. Peter then recognizes that his life, as well as Landreaux's life, have been saved by the boy.

## Nola

Nola Ravich is the mother of Dusty and Maggie and the wife of Peter. Always plagued by a little darkness, Nola becomes suicidal after the death of Dusty, for which (at first) she wholly blames Landreaux. However, Nola also blames herself for letting Dusty wander off without her realizing it in the first place. Nola is made marginally better by LaRose's presence, but then she becomes suicidal. Nola's pain and agony finally disappear when she learns that LaRose can commune with Dusty and that Dusty is alive and well on the other side.

## Dusty

Dusty Ravich is the deceased son of Peter and Nola Ravich and the best friend of LaRose. He is killed when he follows a dog to the edge of the family property. A deer, which Landreaux is set to kill, bolts away. The bullet strikes and kills Dusty, who crosses over to Heaven. He returns to commune with the living through LaRose. Dusty explains to LaRose that his death was an accident on Landreaux's part, even if the death itself had been preordained by others.

## Father Travis

Father Travis is the local Catholic priest for Ojibwe Indian reservation and the surrounding towns, including Hoopdance and Pluto. Travis is a Marine Corps combat veteran who has turned to a life with God and helping people around him. Travis does his best to help the Irons and the Raviches navigate the tragedy and fallout surrounding the killing of Dusty. It is later Father Travis who confronts Romeo about his lies about the death of Dusty. By the end of the novel, Father Travis packs up and transfers because he has fallen in love with Emmaline. He knows that he can never have her.



## Maggie

Maggie is the daughter of Peter and Nola Ravich. She is the older sister of Dusty. She is a young girl when the novel opens and about fifteen when it ends. Maggie is saddened by the death of Dusty, but she quickly takes to LaRose living with the family. Maggie comes to consider LaRose a brother, and she and he look out for one another as time goes by. Because of this, Josette and Snow become very close with Maggie, accepting her as a sister. Maggie ultimately comes to attend the same school as Josette and Snow, and to play volleyball with them. Maggie's confiding fears about Nola's suicidal nature in LaRose results not only in LaRose helping to save Nola, but in LaRose saving Landreaux and Peter later in the novel. Toward the end of the novel, Maggie falls in love with a boy at school named Waylan, with whom she has a very sexual relationship.

## Hollis

Hollis is considered the eldest son of Landreaux and Emmaline, even though he is the biological son of Romeo. Hollis was sent to live with the Irons because they could provide Hollis a life that Romeo could not give him. Hollis, an unplanned child brought about by a drug-induced liaison by Romeo with an unidentified woman, loves his adoptive family deeply, but he also loves his scoundrel father. Hollis, eager to move beyond the past of the Indian Wars, joins the National Guard. Hollis and Josette have also fallen in love with one another and are prepared to date by the end of the novel. It is Hollis's graduation party at the end of the novel that finally and fully brings together all parts of the family –including Romeo.

## Romeo

Romeo is the father of Hollis. He can be considered the book's antagonist, though he is not truly evil. Romeo is driven by inadequacy and the need for revenge by reinventing the past, as he blames his arm and leg injuries on a misadventure with Landreaux. This, in turn, fueled Romeo's drug addiction. He blames Landreaux for stealing Emmaline from him, even though he never had Emmaline. Romeo dedicates his life to seeking a way to destroy Landreaux, while at the same time being glad he gave Hollis up to be raised by the Irons because he could never give Hollis the same kind of stable life. When Hollis is older, however, Romeo considers it a betrayal that Hollis does not want to move in with him.

Eventually, Romeo obtains a copy of the coroner's report on Dusty, from which he picks and chooses facts to build a false narrative about Landreaux leaving Dusty to die. He is able to convince Peter of this narrative. It nearly gets Landreaux killed, and Romeo is humbled in a confrontation with Father Travis. Romeo later attends Hollis's graduation party, where he presents Hollis with a gift of a three-thousand-dollar bank account to start Hollis off on the right foot in life.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Landreaux's rifle

Landreaux uses a hunting rifle to hunt deer and other large animals along his property to provide additional food for his family. It is with his hunting rifle that Landreaux accidentally kills Dusty when Landreaux initially intends to kill a deer. Devastated by the accident, Landreaux later burns the gun, so that it can never be used by anyone again.

## Deer

A deer is hunted by Landreaux early in the novel, and becomes symbolic of a bridge, or guide, between the present world and the next. Landreaux stalks and intends to kill the deer early in the novel, but the deer bolts away just in time to avoid the shot. Instead, Dusty is killed. Here, the deer has arrived to ensure that Danny's life in this world will end. The deer is on hand to guide Dusty's spirit into the afterlife.

## Dog

A stray dog begins hanging around the Ravich farm just prior to Dusty's death, and becomes a symbolic omen of preordained death. Dusty befriends the dog, and follows the dog through the family property to the area where he will be killed instead of a deer. The dog ensures that Dusty will be killed, but it also ensures Dusty's spirit will be guided to Heaven by the deer.

## LaRose (as a traditional name)

LaRose is the namesake of the youngest child in each generation of Irons, and represents goodness and salvation. The name, having begun with the LaRose who married Wolfred back in the 1800s, has come to mean Mirage, or Ombaniamagad, over time. The name is passed on to the present day, eponymous LaRose, who in turn comes to salvage, save, and then bring together both the Irons and the Raviches.

## Invictus memorization sheet

An Invictus memorization sheet is given to Landreaux by Mrs. Peace, and is a symbolic reminder to Landreaux to keep on living despite tragedy. Invictus is a poem by William Ernest Henley in which the narrator refuses to submit to circumstances, chooses to remain alive, and chooses to remain in control of his own life. The memorization sheet was written by Landreaux as a student in the effort to memorize the poem, and serves as refreshing reassurance to Landreaux after the death of Dusty.



## The Serpent story

The serpent story, told by Ignatia, is symbolic of the idea that life is always chased by the past. In the story, an adulterous wife is beheaded by her husband after compromising the sanctity of her family, and her head chases after her children until the head is transformed into a river-dwelling sturgeon. The story is reflective of the death of Dusty, and how the killing has plagued the Irons and the Raviches.

## Coroner's report

The coroner's report on Dusty's killing is obtained by Romeo. Romeo uses it to concoct a wild story about Dusty's death so Peter will take action against Landreaux. The coroner's report details that Dusty was shot and bled to death, but Romeo twists this to mean that Landreaux deliberately allowed Dusty to die. Enraged by this, Peter tries to kill Landreaux; and Father Travis later sits Romeo down and confronts him about the truth of what the report actually says rather than what Romeo wants it to say.

## Bullets

LaRose removes all bullets from all of Peter Ravich's guns. This symbolize the salvation offered by LaRose. LaRose originally removes the bullets because he and Maggie fear that Nola may try to commit suicide in any number of ways, including by gun. When Peter later tries to kill Landreaux with one of these guns, he cannot fire because the bullets have been removed. He then recognizes that his life, in addition to Landreaux's life, have both been saved.

## Graduation party

A graduation party is held for Hollis upon his graduation from high school. The party becomes symbolic of the compact between the dead, the living, and the unborn. The graduation party itself brings together friends and family of various generations, as well as spirits of the dead and young people who have yet to reach maturity or to be born. The party demonstrates that society, founded on families, draws on the lessons, traditions, experience, and wisdom of the past to inform and make better the present. The improved present is handed down to future generations to make life even better for all of the generations that follow.

## Three thousand dollars

Three thousand dollars is given to Hollis by Romeo as a graduation gift. The gift symbolizes Romeo's efforts to redeem himself for the past. The three thousand dollars matters greatly to both Hollis and Romeo because it is money that Romeo chose not to



spend on drugs or alcohol. Instead, the money is given to his son with the intentions of helping Holis build a better life.



# Settings

## The Iron House

The Iron house is located on Iron family property on the Ojibwe Indian Reservation. Settled in the 1840s by Wolfred and the first LaRose, the land became home to four children between the two, as well as a small cabin which became the basis for the larger house the Irons know today. The Iron house is where Landreaux and Emmaline have married and raise four biological and one adopted child (Hollis, Coochy, Josette, Snow, and LaRose). The Iron house is where LaRose comes to stay in alternating months as Ojibwe tradition maintains he be given to the Raviches in the stead of their lost son. As time passes, the Iron house becomes a second home to Maggie as well, and later serves as a place of union for both families through Hollis's graduation and LaRose's gifts.

## The Ravich House

The Ravich house is located on Ravich family property that formerly composed part of the Ojibwe Indian Reservation. The Ravich house is smaller than the Iron house, but very neat and orderly. The Ravich house is where Peter, Nola, Maggie, and Dusty live, and is later where LaRose comes to live on a month by month basis. At the Ravich house, LaRose does his best to keep Nola happy, becomes very close with Maggie, and later works with Maggie to try to avert Nola's penchant for suicide. Josette later comes to visit Maggie at the Ravich house, as the house itself becomes less forbidding and warm as the tragedy of Dusty's death grows dim with time.

## The Border Line

The border line is located between Iron family land, and Ravich family land. Woodland composes much of the border, while on the Ravich side of the border, corn grows; and while on the Iron side of the border, there is unidentified farmland. It is on the border between both properties that Landreaux hunts a deer, and accidentally kills Dusty. The border acts as a place not only between Iron and Ravich lands, but as a place between Heaven and Earth. It marks the place where Dusty is guided by the dog, and crosses over into the next life under the guidance of the deer. The border line also represents the turning point between past and present lives for the Irons and the Raviches .

## Ojibwe Indian Reservation

The Ojibwe Indian Reservation is located in North Dakota. It is on Ojibwe Indian Reservation land that the Irons have their home, adjacent to the Raviches who have their home on land formerly comprising part of the Reservation. The Reservation is administered by an Indian government, monitored by Indian policemen, cared for by



Indian Health Services, and so on. The Ojibwe lands are under federal law, but operate according to their own rules and regulations. The Ojibwe lands form the broad setting for the novel, as LaRose troops back and forth between his home and the Ravich property following the death of Dusty on land between the two places.

## **The Afterlife**

The afterlife (referred to as Heaven, the other side, and the afterlife) is a realm where the spirit of a person exists after their physical life on earth has ended. As Catholics and Ojibwe, LaRose and the others believe that God watches over the afterlife as well as the physical life. The afterlife is a place that is safe, stable, and welcoming. LaRose frequently communes with Dusty and other members of the afterlife, which in turn reassures Nola that Dusty is safe and sound and alive in Heaven. Knowledge of the afterlife also removes the darkness from Nola's life and prevents her from attempting suicide again.



## Themes and Motifs

### **Good and evil cannot always be generically classified or easily defined.**

Good and evil cannot always be generically classified or easily defined, Louise Erdrich argues in her novel *LaRose*. This is especially true when it comes to human beings. By nature, people are flawed and imperfect even as they strive to be good. Being good is not always easy. Likewise, attempting to determine good from evil is not easy.

The accidental killing of Dusty by Landreaux is seen by readers, and by legal authorities and many others in the novel, as a tragic accident. (Dusty himself later says just this to *LaRose*.) However, despite the killing being an accident, Landreaux cannot will away his feelings of guilt and moral culpability. He has done a bad thing, and feels as if he has become a bad person. Randall, and others, assure Landreaux that this is not true. Nola herself even stops believing that Landreaux must be held to blame later in the novel, realizing that Dusty's death was a tragic accident, and that good things have come out of it.

Those good things include the coming together of the Iron and Ravich families in ways not previously anticipated. It also ensures that *LaRose* is able to live up to the expectations of his namesake. He does this both directly and unintentionally, helping to stop Nola from committing suicide by speaking to Dusty in the afterlife. He also does this unintentionally by preventing two actual acts of evil, wherein he removes the bullets from guns in the Ravich house, eliminating a potential way of committing suicide for Nola, while unintentionally saving Peter from killing Landreaux, and saving Landreaux from being killed by Peter.

Evil is later more difficult to discern where it concerns Romeo. On the one hand, Romeo is responsible and good enough a person to recognize that he will never capably raise Hollis, so he gives Hollis to Emmaline to be raised. Yet, on the other hand, Romeo's life is fueled by the desire for revenge against Landreaux for his past injuries, and for supposedly stealing Emmaline. Romeo's determination to bring Landreaux down nearly results in Peter's murdering Landreaux—but this in turn is prevented by the goodness of *LaRose*. While Romeo is not evil, he is certainly not good, either. Rather, he is a scoundrel, deeply flawed but seeking to do better. Just as he cannot be condemned and dismissed as evil, so too can he not be honored or praised as good.

### **Life is a compact between the living and the dead, between this world and the next.**

Life is a compact between the living and the dead, between this world and the next, Louise Erdrich argues in her novel "*LaRose*." The idea is taken from the philosophical



work of Eighteenth Century British conservative philosopher and politician, Edmund Burke. Burke explained that society, built on families, was a compact between the living, the dead, and the unborn, in which the living inherit from the dead wisdom, experience, tradition, practice, culture, and so on, which they must in turn use to better the world so that it, and their inherited customs, may be passed on to the next generation. The dead must be respected, Burke warned, or life and the living will not make sense.

Life and death form the core backbone of the novel's plot, arising in the very first paragraphs with the accidental killing of Dusty. Dusty now numbers among the dead, and has crossed over into Heaven, but his memory has a tremendous bearing on the living. Both the Iron and the Ravich families are devastated by Dusty's death, and neither can truly make sense of it while their emotions (understandably) get in the way. Landreaux believes he has made a bargain with evil for the killing of Dusty, a debt which can only ever be paid with misfortune and death on his own part. But the dead warn the living –Dusty to Landreaux through LaRose –that the death was accidental, and cannot be held against Landreaux punitively.

While most accept the warnings of the dead, justice must still be done in accord with Ojibwe tradition –the inherited customs of the dead. LaRose comes to be shared between the Irons and the Raviches, who in turn ultimately blesses both families and brings them closer together. The tradition of giving up one son for another is modified to rely on tradition, but to break with it as well as LaRose is allowed to live between both families and their houses, rather than being eternally committed to the other. Here, the living respect the traditions of the dead, but modify those traditions to make the world better for LaRose, and the others who will one day inherit things. LaRose himself is the namesake of saviors in the Iron family, and his role in saving Peter, Landreaux, Maggie, and Nola comes to be respected by all as the embodiment of the inherited customs of the past.

The wisdom of the dead, of past generations, is also to be found in the conveyance of stories from one generation to the next. Such wisdom is found in the Serpent story, passed along by Ignatia, in which the deep concept that life is chased after by the past is related. Likewise, the educating of Iron children in both Ojibwe and American culture is a tradition that has ensured Iron family members will be productive and capable citizens in both Ojibwe and American lands. Likewise, the very land itself upon which the Irons, the Raviches, and other families live is an inherited claim from the dead – lands made better by the hands of the dead, to be made better still by the living, and to be made better yet by the unborn when they come into possession of it.

## **Traditions are important and cannot be thrown away.**

Traditions are important and cannot be thrown away. Louise Erdrich argues in her novel *LaRose*. Traditions –essentially the customs based on experiential knowledge and practiced wisdom by past generations –are essential for cultural and human survival, and help to make sense of things. This is in keeping with the theme of life being a



compact between the living, the dead, and the unborn. It focuses specifically on traditions themselves.

The killing of Dusty by Landreaux, accidental though it was, requires the practice of traditional Ojibwe ways. Accidental though it was, Landreaux has still taken the life of the young son of Peter and Nola, so compensation must be made. Landreaux and Emmaline must lose, in a way, their own son by giving LaRose to the Raviches to be raised by them in the stead of their lost son. This helps both families to grieve and to heal. The tradition is modified slightly by both families, so that both families may enjoy the love and company of LaRose. The carrying out of tradition also ensure that LaRose will be able to live up to his namesake by saving the lives of Peter, Landreaux, Maggie, and Nola in various ways. If this tradition had never been carried out at all, both families would have been irreparably harmed.

In order to survive in the modern world, the Ojibwe and local whites have taken it upon themselves to be familiar with the culture of each other. It has become a tradition that has ensured harmony, love, and cooperation between people who have, in the past, been enemies at times. The Iron family especially has handed down the tradition of educating its children in both the ways of the Americans (and Catholics), and the Ojibwes, ensuring that they be competent and capable human beings. This tradition was begun by the ancestors of the Irons, Wolfred (a white American who learned the ways of the Ojibwe out of respect and love for the first LaRose) and LaRose (an Ojibwe who learned the ways of the Americans out of respect and love for Wolfred). This respect can also be seen in the way that Landreaux did, and Hollis now does, serve the United States in the Armed Forces.

Tradition is also held up in at least one more important place. This is LaRose's communing with Dusty, and the other spirits of the dead. This direct consultation, respect for, and the leaving of offerings for the dead ensures that wisdom and protection can be passed along to the living. Here, American, Catholic, and Ojibwe customs combine in a tradition of respect and honor for the dead. In so carrying out the tradition of communing with the dead, it is possible for Nola to overhear LaRose's conversation with Dusty. This in turn lifts the darkness from Nola, who realizes her son is alright in the next world, and so removes her impulse to suicide.

## **Redemption is always possible no matter how tragic the circumstance.**

Louise Erdrich argues in her novel *LaRose* that redemption is always possible. Redemption, or being redeemed, is the process and achievement of atoning for one's sins, crimes, or wrong-doings. In the novel, Landreaux and Romeo both struggle for different kinds of redemption. Erdrich points out that redemption is possible for both of them if they are willing to earn it.

At first, both Landreau and Romeo have no desire for redemption. This is because Landreau is unwilling to ask for it, and because Romeo genuinely believes he does not



need to seek it. Landreaux, having killed Dusty, believes there is no way at all he can possibly be redeemed. What he does believe, however, is that bad luck and misfortune will plague his life until his debt for killing Dusty is repaid –and Landreaux believes this debt can never be paid. At the same time, Romeo, who lies, cheats, and steals, does so only because he believes he is justified in doing so based on supposedly being wrong by Landreaux. Romeo does not hold himself responsible for any of his actions, but blames everything on Landreaux.

The unwillingness of either Landreaux or Romeo to seek redemption ultimately plays out in the near murder of Landreaux. Romeo invents a false narrative about the events of Dusty's death, and sells this narrative to Peter. Peter in turn becomes enraged, and seeks to murder Landreaux in revenge. However, LaRose's removal of bullets from Peter's guns for reasons wholly unrelated to Peter's desire for revenge mean that no such revenge will be had. Landreaux, however, does not know this at first. He believes his own life will be the price that must be paid for the killing of Dusty –and is stunned to discover this is not so. He recognizes that he has indeed redeemed himself through his trials and efforts to make things right, and so is able to forgive Peter for the near murder.

Romeo is only chastened when confronted by an agent of God in the form of Father Travis, who chastens and humbles Romeo for his part in nearly getting Landreaux killed, and in the way Romeo has lived his life. Romeo finally has a moral awakening, and redeems himself by letting go of the past, and committing to ensuring his son's future. This is accomplished by Romeo saving up three-thousand dollars to give to Hollis upon Hollis's graduation from high school.

## **The past must be taken as it is, not as people want it to be.**

The past must be taken as it is, not as people want it to be, according to Louise Erdrich in her novel *LaRose*. The past chases after life, according to the traditional Ojibwe story about the Great Serpent and the headless wife (see symbols and objects section of this guide). The past matters greatly to the characters in the novel. No matter how badly they want to change it or why they want to change it, the past is what it is and cannot be changed.

Landreaux's killing of Dusty, though an accident, becomes the seminal event of his past. It is something that chases after him like a ghost. It is something he cannot escape, and is something he cannot change no matter how much he wishes he could go back and make things turn out differently. What is done is done. Landreaux must deal with things as they are –and this includes his belief that he must be punished in order to atone for redemption for the past.

Whereas Landreaux wishes he could change the past to avoid the hurt and heartache he has caused others, Romeo has ignored the truth of the past to justify his own life and the way he lives it. Romeo, a scoundrel who steals prescription painkillers, gets high constantly, drinks copiously, jumps from job to job, and has no real friends or



connections. He blames everything on Landreaux and the run-away misadventure they had while they were kids in school. Although a dual decision to run away, Romeo blames Landreaux fully for everything, including his broken arm and leg. He also blames Landreaux for stealing away Emmaline from him, even though he never had Emmaline to begin with.

Apart from their personal lives, Romeo also attempts to reinvent the past pertaining to Dusty in order to accommodate his desire for revenge against Landreaux. He does this by picking and choosing facts from the coroner's report on Dusty's death. He uses what is necessary to construct a false narrative from which to blame Landreaux for the killing. This nearly gets Landreaux killed and earns Romeo a humbling encounter with Father Travis, who bears down on Romeo for his sins with the full force of God. Romeo comes to recognize where he has erred. He meekly determines to let go of the past once and for all.





# Styles

## Point of View

Louise Erdrich tells her novel *LaRose* in the third-person, omniscient narrative mode. The novel itself takes place in the 1800s, the 1960s, and the early 2000s, while also taking place between the frontier wilderness, various parts of the state of North Dakota and Minnesota, and across even the eastern half of the country to Pennsylvania. The novel also features a host of characters, including the first *LaRose* and *Wolfred*, the latest *LaRose* and his efforts to live up to his namesake, and the child and adult versions of *Landreaux* and *Romeo*. The novel also follows the events surrounding the death of *Dusty* and focuses on how it affects both the *Irons* and the *Raviches*. This is all made possible by the third-person narrator. The third-person narrator acts as a single, unifying thread that draws together the various characters, parts, times, and places of the novel. The third-person voice provides a bridge of consistency throughout, tying together these different elements to create an overall story. That the reader knows things the characters themselves do not know gives the narrator a place of omniscience, both in the past and in the present. Thus, the reader is able to determine how things unfold or why they unfold, even if the characters themselves do not –or are late to realize such things, such as when *Peter* realizes his empty gun is to be credited to *LaRose*.

## Language and Meaning

Louise Erdrich tells her novel *LaRose* in language that is lyrical and deeply pensive and reflective. Given the tragedy, gravity, and tenderness of the novel's plot, it is only fitting that the language be reflective of such atmosphere. Erdrich, who is part Ojibwe Indian herself, has great reverence for Ojibwe and Catholic culture, which in turn praise and respect beauty, tradition, spirituality, and the natural world. The language that she employs in part grows out of respect of these traditions. Taken in conjunction with the death of *Dusty* and the evolving plot of the novel, the language that Erdrich uses underscores the sadness, grief, and efforts of various characters to find hope. Consider the gently-worded, lyrical but heartbreaking conversation in "The Door" in the aftermath of *Danny's* death when *LaRose* is to be given to the *Raviches*, on page 16: "Our son will be your son... It's the old way, said *Landreaux*. He said it very quickly, got the words out yet again. There was a lot more to their decision, but he could no longer speak." Or consider *Wolfed's* proposal of marriage to the first *LaRose* on page 145, which is heartfelt and resonantly deep wit meaning, but simply and poetically worded: "The next morning, speaking earnestly to the girl, whose clean face was too beautiful to look at, *Woldred* asked if she would marry him. When you grow up, he said. She smiled and nodded."

## Structure

Louise Erdrich divides her novel *LaRose* into five major parts, with each part being subdivided into unnumbered, titled chapters and smaller, often untitled sections. Each major part of the novel deals with a specific set of events or particular event, while the chapters and sections within those parts deal with specific parts of those events. For example, “Two Houses: 1999-2000” deals with the events of Dusty’s death and how both the Iron and the Ravich families begin to attempt to cope with the aftermath of the tragedy.

“Two Houses” is divided into three chapters, with each chapter dealing with a particular part of the plot. For example, the chapter “The Door” deals with Dusty’s death and the bringing of *LaRose* to the Raviches, with Landreaux and Emmaline standing in the doorway of the Ravich house to give up their son.

In other parts of the novel, such as “Wolfréd and Larose,” a single chapter, “The Old One,” takes up the entire part of the novel. This chapter and part details the married life of Wolfréd and *LaRose* and their raising of their four children –as well as the beginning of important family traditions and customs.



## Quotes

Our son will be your son now.  
-- Landreaux (The Door)

**Importance:** After Landreaux accidentally kills Peter Ravich's son, Landreaux does not know what to do. He consults with his wife, and the two decide to give their youngest son, LaRose, to the Raviches to raise. Landreaux is devastated and begins to withdraw from his own life as a result.

Life don't quit.  
-- Ottie Plume (The Gate)

**Importance:** Landreaux tends to his mother-in-law, Mrs. Peace, who gives Landreaux an old memorization sheet he used for the poem "Invictus." Landreaux next visits with Ottie Plume, who has lost a foot to diabetes and is struggling on with life. Ottie is thrilled to have been able to use the bathroom by himself. He declares to Landreaux that life does not stop. Landreaux, still wracked with guilt and devastated over accidentally killing Dusty, needs to hear these things.

This dog loves life.  
-- Peter (The Passage)

**Importance:** Peter notices a straggly dog lurking around the area where Dusty was killed. Peter ultimately takes the dog in as the family gains the trust of the dog. Peter recognizes the dog is from somewhere and has a story as well as a love of life. The dog must stay. Peter recognizes something spiritual and profound in the dog that he lacks in himself. The dog's love for life, despite its hardships, becomes motivation for Peter.

What's it doing to him?  
-- Peter (The Passage)

**Importance:** Peter and Landreaux speak on the subject of LaRose and the tradition of debt payments. Peter says that he knows LaRose misses his real family, but Nola has come to love LaRose like a son. Peter then states that LaRose cannot be kept or denied to anyone. Both families must share LaRose with one another.

Bad luck rarely stops with one occurrence. All Indians know that. To stop it quickly takes great effort, which is why LaRose was sent.  
-- Narrator (The Crossbeams)

**Importance:** Bad luck seems to have followed LaRose's family back through the generations. The name LaRose is given to help deter evil and bad luck. Here, the narrator explains that Ojibwe Indians know that bad luck rarely stops with one occurrence. It keeps coming back to haunt entire families like a ghost. The death of



Dusty was certainly bad luck –a bad luck which LaRose seeks to break up and stop while healing two families at the same time.

Stolen. Your mother was stolen.  
-- Wolfred (The Old One)

**Importance:** Wolfred and LaRose (the girl whom he has saved) marry, live on a farm, and raise four children. LaRose, however, contracts tuberculosis and battles it for ten years. Ultimately, the disease overwhelms her. Wolfred is heartbroken at having been unable to save her a second time. The name LaRose has been taken by their youngest child –which will begin a tradition of naming the youngest child in the family LaRose. Each LaRose will come to be a savior in some way. Wolfred's LaRose gave him a life he never could have imagined having –a wonderful, happy life with four beautiful children. Wolfred can only look upon LaRose's death as theft.

Can you help me?  
-- Maggie (The Green Chair)

**Importance:** Maggie discovers her mother ready to hang herself, but she talks her mother down. A sickened Maggie throws up for the next two days. She then consults LaRose about the incident, asking for his help. Here, the Indian tradition that bad luck and evil rarely visit once is upheld, as is the idea of the LaRose namesake being one of salvation. What LaRose will attempt to do to save Nola, however, is not yet known – though he agrees to help Maggie.

You just pass me around, he said. I'm okay with it, but it gets old. Problem is, Nola, she's gonna be too sad. It might be death if she gets too said. Maggie told me... We keep her mom going when she can't get out of bed and stuff.  
-- LaRose (The Green Chair)

**Importance:** LaRose learns that Emmaline intends to keep him permanently. LaRose's response makes Emmaline consider him to be a little man. LaRose explains he gets tired of the back-and-forth, but he can handle it. Most pressing to him is the stability of Nola, who is suicidal. LaRose worries what may happen to Nola if he leaves permanently. Emmaline decides to allow LaRose to continue back and forth between the houses, immensely proud and overwhelmed.

We got you covered too.  
-- Snow (The Green Chair)

**Importance:** While Nola and Emmaline become devoted to LaRose, favoring him over their other children, the children themselves find comfort in one another. Maggie is upset by always coming second, but Josette and Snow remind Maggie she will always have a place with them. The three girls consider one another full-fledged sisters now, and this is how they refer to one another among themselves, to their family, and in public.



Something unknown, internal, righted itself. She felt unalone... Because the fabric between realities, living and dead, was porous not only to herself. This pass-between existed. LaRose went there too.

-- Narrator (The Letters)

**Importance:** Nola finally overcomes her darkness, burning the chair she intended to use to hang herself. She has overcome the darkness inside her because she hears LaRose playing with the spirit of Dusty. This means someone else can feel there is another side, and it reassures her that Dusty is safe and happy on that other side. LaRose has lived up to his name and helped to ease the pain of Nola.

LaRose saving him now, saving both his fathers.

-- Narrator (The Letters)

**Importance:** Romeo fills Peter's head with lies about the death of Dusty, which prompts Peter to seek to kill Landreaux with a hunting rifle. Peter tries to fire at Landreaux, but the gun has been unloaded by LaRue because he feared that Nola would try to take her own life. Peter then realizes that his life and Landreaux's life have been saved by LaRose. LaRose has lived up to his name in unimaginable ways.

We love you, don't cry. Sorrow eats time. Be patient. Time eats sorrow.

-- The spirits of the ancestors (The Gathering)

**Importance:** As the graduation party gets underway and brings together friends, family, the living, and the dead, LaRose listens to what the dead ancestors have to say. They explain that time heals and the living should not cry for pain for they have the love of the ancestors. LaRose takes this to heart because he trusts the wisdom of the dead. Also, he has seen for himself how time heals sorrow, but sorrow will waste away a human life.