Tales of Burning Love Short Guide

Tales of Burning Love by Louise Erdrich

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Contents

Characters

Erdrich handles characters differently from most writers. The subordination of major and minor characters common among other writers is missing from her novels, and Tales of Burning Love, with its huge cast of characters, is no exception.

While many characters from previous novels appear here in cameo roles, few unimportant characters exist in the book.

Jack Mauser is no more important than his wives; characters such as Eleanor's parents, particularly her mother, are significant. To some of Erdrich's critics, this absence of a hierarchy and emphasis on the group is a characteristic of her writing, a part of her ethics as a writer and person.

Many characters in Tales of Burning Love appear in other Erdrich novels. These include Leopolda, Lyman Lamartine, Lipsha Morrissey, who is not named here, June Morrissey, Dot Mauser, Mary Adare, Celestine Adare, and a host of others, some named and some not. Part of Erdrich's project is to stitch together all five books dealing with the reservation and Argus, North Dakota: Love Medicine (1984; see separate entry), The Beet Queen (1986; see separate entry); Tracks, and The Bingo Palace (1994; see separate entry).

For example, some of these reworked characters in Tales of Burning Love, such as Jack, June Morrissey, and Sister Leopolda, seem much different than their earlier incarnations in Love Medicine. Jack and June's mock wedding held in a bar is not in Love Medicine. Nor is there any sense that Andy in Love Medicine is Jack in disguise. The Andy of the earlier book is simply an oil industry mud engineer who picks up a woman in a bar. The relationship is more important to June than it is to Andy in Love Medicine. Jack, with all his quick fix shortcomings, is a miracle of sensitivity compared to the lightly sketched Andy of the earlier book.

Leopolda, who seemed near death in 1957 when Marie Kashpaw visits her in Love Medicine, has managed to live to 108 in Tales of Burning Love. Still more miraculous in Tales of Burning Love is what seems to be the snatching of Gerry Nanapush and Lipsha Morrissey from an implied death in the snow in The Bingo Palace. It seems as if Erdrich wished to close the series of novels dealing with the reservation and Argus with The Bingo Palace, but changed her mind and continued it with Tales of Burning Love. Most readers will rejoice, since the apparent killing of Gerry and Lipsha in The Bingo Palace seemed abrupt, and no reason exists why Erdrich should not continue the series as long as Faulkner continued his Yoknapatawpha novels and stories— throughout her life.

Because of the absence of hierarchy in Erdrich's characterization, it almost logically follows that most of her characters are developing rather than static and one dimensional. Jack, his wives, and nearly everyone in the novel develop. Jack begins as a womanizing exploiter, a man hemmed in by debts he cannot pay and a housing development he cannot market.

While he does not set the fire that burns his house down and causes him to be declared legally dead, he does not fight the fire that he sees and smells. As usual with Erdrich, she teases one into thinking that Jack dies in his burning house only to have him reborn later. The near death provides Jack with a fresh start; the infant son he was indifferent to becomes important. He can sympathetically understand the attraction of his two former wives, Candice and Marlis, and wishes them well. When he begins to work for Lyman, he both accepts his Indian heritage as well as allowing himself to be a part of another's plan rather than the initiating contractor.

Eleanor Mauser, who uses her intellect as a teacher to intimidate and deservedly is fired for sexual harassment of an undergraduate, begins to improve in the course of the novel. Her resentment of her mother, stimulated by jealousy and envy, eases, as she tells Jack's other wives of her mother's rescue of herself as a child and later Jack as a young fireman.

Her fascination with Sister Leopolda, about whom she hopes to do a book, helps Eleanor deal with the vices of her character, in part by misreading the values of Leopolda. Since Jack was the partial cause of her father's temporary rejection of Anna and herself, she is angry with him for marring her childhood. Eleanor attempts to prove her father's jealousy groundless and bring her parents back together by seducing Jack. Older, Eleanor realizes that she is blaming Jack for a loss he neither could correct or was responsible for. When Eleanor is free of resentment of Jack, she is able to love him.

Marlis is the most exploitive character of the novel initially. She meets Jack when he tries to revive her from an electric shock she hoped to use in a suit against a chain store. She is mean. She steals a large check from Jack, persuades him to marry her, and deposits the check in her name. Candice, however, spurred by Marlis's pregnancy, perceives Marlis's meanness as resulting from being abandoned by her mother. While Marlis never agrees to Candice's hypothesis, her response and actions make Candice's guess probable. Both of these limited women grow by giving.

Dot Mauser, who appeared in Love Medicine, The BeetQueen, and briefly in The Bingo Palace, is one of the novel's simplest characters. Her headstrong nature causes all the women to get stuck during the snowstorm; none of the other wives would have ventured out in it. Honest, forceful, but generous, Dot can recognize her own errors, such as divorcing Gerry when she still loves him. As forceful as she is, she is still less forceful than the character we see in the earlier novels.

The seeming inconsistencies between characters appearing in the earlier novels and Tales of Burning Love may be the result of characterization that is less mimetically novelistic and more like that which is seen in a romance.

Social Concerns

While love is not easy anywhere for anyone, the Native American heritage of Jack and Dot Mauser in Tales of Burning Love is a complicating factor. Jack imagines that the only reason to acknowledge his Native American heritage is if he is defeated in life, and so, like many African-Americans at the turn of the century, he spends much of the novel "passing," sometimes as a white contractor or a white singer. For Jack to achieve an integration that a lifetime of hopeless temporary fixes never provided, he needs to acknowledge his Indian mother, the foundation of his character and a clue to loving others, and even the rich land that he carelessly develops. To some extent Jack's uneasiness about his heritage helps precipitate the failure of his bar "marriage" to June Morrissey, who dies in a snowstorm after their drunken encounter, a willed death and perhaps a suicide.

While liquor excuses Jack, June's death haunts him and casts a shadow on successive relationships. Although the European heritage of Erdrich's characters are not as controlling as the Native Americans, Lawrence Schlick's German, Candice Pantamounty's Norwegian, and Marlis Cook Mauser's Polish backgrounds play their parts in shaping character.

Jack's supposed death in the burning of his house brings four of the wives together for Jack's funeral. In the process of driving home from a meeting of three of the wives with Marlis at the B and B, a restaurant and illegal gambling establishment, the women get stuck in a Midwestern blizzard, a storm so fierce that they can expect little help until the snow abates. As in Giovanni Boccaccio's Decameron (1620) or Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales (c.1387-1394), the women tell tales, in this case tales to keep from falling asleep and freezing to death. As Eleanor says, each wife must have had some reason to marry Jack, so the tales deal with each woman's relationship to him.

While the everyday encounters of these women with each other prior to Jack's supposed death generate explorations of love, the tales are the most concentrated exploration of love, and Erdrich enriches them by adding flashbacks of past encounters from the consciousness of the teller of each tale. In so doing Dot Mauser remembers Gerry Nanapush, her first husband, her Native American mother, Celestine, and her Aunt Mary; Eleanor Mauser remembers how Jack caused a painful split between her mother, Anna Schlick, and her father, Lawrence; and Candice and Marlis recall what began their lesbian relationship, Candice's inability to have a child but desire to have one, and Marlis's low self-esteem, caused by being abandoned by her mother and her pregnancy with Jack.

One might think that because three characters die in the course of the narrative, Anna and Lawrence Schlick and Sister Leopolda, the narrative is melodramatic or possibly tragic, but the development of love in Tales of Burning Love is similar to what one finds in Shakespearean comedy. While Eleanor Mauser and Jack will probably not remarry at novel's end, they do get together. Marlis busily seduces Jack to provide for yet another baby; each woman is more settled than she had been. Dot, who was always more

attracted to Gerry, her first husband, is briefly consoled and loved by him as he makes another escape from prison. Her consolation prize for his absence is probably another child and a new gas station business with her mother and aunt. While the open promise of a new marriage is not present for any of these characters, an integration, a new beginning of their lives, does take place. Even the middle-aged can make fresh starts.

Sister Leopolda, the vicious nun of Love Medicine and the tormented lover of Tracks (1988; see separate entry), appears to have renounced her religion of pain, guilt, and suffering seen in Erdrich's earlier novels, as she speaks Indian words and advises Eleanor, an unlikely novice, to "pull forth the nails" of the cross, a still higher love. This may be an advance from what Leopolda says earlier, when she calls her prayer "a tale of burning love." Attempting to clean snow from the tail pipe of the car, Eleanor is lost by herself in the snowstorm, having been viciously released by Marlis who refused to provide a safety line. During this ordeal Eleanor sees and hears the dead Leopolda. The figure of Leopolda may be Eleanor's projection, or it may be a spirit from the dead.

If gender is politicized in this novel, the politics are not strident. Jack is a parent's nightmare of a husband who easily lies and cheats, a poster child for any feminist group. No doubt some readers are overcome with glee in imagining the scene in which the daily pain of beauty—depilation, rollers, and the mess of beautiful hair—are lavished upon Jack as he is tied up by Marlis in a motel room. That Marlis and Candice are happier with each other than with Jack as a husband may also be seen as a triumph by some.

Techniques

Where other novelists might agree with Aristotle that representative actions should be probable, Erdrich relishes including accidents into her works. During their trapeze act the main tent pole is struck by lightning, and Anna Shlick's first husband dies as the two are in the air; Jack is lying on a pedestal in convent grounds making love to Eleanor when Leopolda comes out to pray and does not sense or see him; Gerry is picked up as a hitchhiker during a snowstorm and is not recognized by his former wife; Jack leaves his plow and the road in the middle of the same storm and finds the stalled car with his son and Lipsha Morrissey in it in a field when he can barely see; and Leopolda is struck by lightning, killed and seemingly carried away. By no means is this list of improbable events complete, but rather than get disgusted with Erdrich as detective story readers would for these improbabilities, readers simply laugh. For Erdrich, fiction need not be more probable than life. John Irving would agree. In The World According to Garp (1978; see separate entry) his main character buys a house because an airplane crashed into it; accidents are regularly worked into his texts.

Erdrich likes to tease readers' expectations, sometimes with cliffhanger situations that end chapters, and other times with misleading feints of possibility. The identity of the hitchhiker that Dot picks up is not made clear for several chapters.

Since it is probable that Jack would be out on the same night of the storm, the possibility that he could be the hitchhiker is present, making the wives' storytelling about Jack richer with comic irony. Even when the hitchhiker proves to be Gerry, the comic irony, so common in Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, does not disappear.

Jack's house fire is similar in character; it seems as if he dies, unable to escape the burning of his house in one chapter, and then several chapters later one sees him breaking through a window, escaping the blaze nude—even without his bridge of false teeth. Erdrich loves playing with readers' expectations, withholding the details that provide for suspense, and the result is wildly funny.

Narrative point of view is mostly third-person with the narrator's level of knowledge closely approaching that of the consciousness of the character being observed. Since so many characters in the novel are dynamic, such a point of view is useful in revealing their changes. Sometimes the narrative voice, however, is as judgmental as any nineteenth century omniscient narrator. In Chuck and Jack Mauser's discussion about the farmland that Jack was to develop, the narrator says, "Since the Ojibwa part of Jack was inaccessible, he was a German with a trapdoor in his soul, an inner life still hidden to him."

Frequently the point of view character's wish to injure one of the other women in the car has much to do with the telling of the stories of how each met and married Jack. All the characters, including Jack, are judged on very clear values, which are vigorously expressed through these closely focused narrative perspectives. The context of the

telling of the story, as in Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, has much to do with its content.

Tales of Burning Love does not have scenes that are as figurative as the ones in Love Medicine and Tracks; however, symbolic scenes do occur. The ashes and burned garments that remain after Leopolda is struck by lightning are nicely ambiguous. One does not know whether she is being punished or acknowledged by God. When Jack, naked, pops out of a basement window during his house fire, a symbolic birth with a fresh beginning is suggested. When Anna Schlick dies, her second husband, Lawrence, quietly prepares her in his funeral parlor downstairs.

After setting the timer as one would a microwave, he places her body and his own in a crematorium. His fiery suicide is both an act of love and an acceptance of punishment for the jealousy that had driven them temporarily apart, a powerful symbolic scene. Such figural scenes occur frequently in the novel, but they generally don't have the mythic power of scenes set on the reservation in Love Medicine and Tracks. This is not a weakness, for such scenes would not work with the overall comic romance style of the novel.

Themes

Nearly all of the major characters of the novel begin with a corruption of love before they proceed to a better love. Jack is a faithless womanizer, and it is not likely in the course of the novel that he experiences any great change; however, he at least resolves some of his relationships and responds to Eleanor. Giving up her undergraduate students, although perhaps not willingly, Eleanor tries to clarify past relations, particularly with Jack. Marlis begins as a parasitic lover, a person who needs to feel power over others, and although her relationship to Candice is exploitive, she is better to others because she is loved and cared for by Candice. Candice, a brittle woman with Jack, wary of her professional dignity, is fulfilled through love of Marlis and Marlis's child, the baby John. Dot is jealous about being loved by Jack, but her jealousy has little to do with love. She knows she still loves Gerry, even though they have been separated by his incarceration.

Good love in the novel desires to preserve life. Jack tries and eventually rescues his infant son, John. Candice begins her relationship to Jack by rescuing Pepperboy, a vicious dog that Jack was going to shoot. So unhappy is Candice about her inability to have children due to an early hysterectomy, she cannot stand the taking of life. Candice is seduced by Marlis's pregnancy, which she desires for herself. Thus Candice reaches out to a woman that her values would normally cause her to despise; she not only serves as a mother to Marlis's child but also to Marlis herself.

Eleanor's mother, Anna Schlick, lost a husband and child in a freakish accident at a circus while performing on the trapeze. Torn by loss, Anna seeks victories over death. When her house is on fire, she rescues Eleanor with circus agility.

When a young fireman, Jack, is freezing to death, Anna is heroic in her efforts to keep him alive, even at the peril of losing her reputation, and temporarily, her husband's love.

Even Shawn, Dot's daughter with Gerry, knows the importance of life, for Shawn protects her father from the police pursuing him. They offer her the value of honesty and truth telling, but she thoughtfully protects her father's escape, valuing life more. Shawn's choice is similar to Leopolda's at the end of her life, when Leopolda chooses to "pull forth the nails" and rejects the choice she has made throughout her vocation.

Protecting the life of the land is also important. Disgusted with Jack's plan to build a subdivision on the good farmland on which he is growing sunflowers, Jack's uncle, Chuck Mauser, says about the land that "The more you fill it up, the emptier it gets." By the end of the novel, Chuck once again has control of the land, and the sunflowers return. As the narrator says of Jack early in the novel, "Land seemed dead to Jack. To Chuck, land was living stuff." It is doubtful that Jack's feeling for the land is changed by novel's end, since he winds up being a tool of Lyman Lamartine's plan to build a large casino on Chippewa land, but a subtle shift occurs in Jack's thinking from control and domination to fitting into life.

Key Questions

Tales of Burning Love can generate a good form and content discussion. The novel dramatizes many broken marriages.

One would think that a dirge would be a more appropriate form for this book than the comic romance; however, comedy usually points to aberrations of social conduct, particularly if satiric targets of humor exist. Discussing the birth and death of each of the relationships would be a good way to begin. Dot, June, and Jack are either full-blooded Native Americans or what Erdrich calls breeds or mixed- bloods. Since Jack is the husband in each relationship, race might be a factor in the collapse of each relationship and should be explored.

1. The mock marriage of June Morrissey and Jack Mauser in the beginning of Tales of Burning Love is odd in many respects. Though both are drunk, first June weights the relationship with her desperate, "You got to be different." Then Jack, sobering and discovering June's death in the snow, feels a loss that his experience with June seemingly ought not provoke.

What is the basis of their attraction? Had June lived, would there have been any future to the relationship? June is going home to the reservation, and Jack is also of mixed Native American heritage. What does June's going home to the reservation and Jack's mixed native heritage have to do with the relationship?

2. The marriage of Eleanor and Jack is tangled up with Anna Schlick rescuing Jack from freezing to death and the temporary break-up of Anna's relationship to her husband, Lawrence, due to his jealousy in discovering them both in bed.

Eleanor's anger at Jack, her mother, and her father is understandable, but why does Eleanor seduce Jack? Is her action simply strategic or is it motivated by desire? What causes their marriage to collapse? What brings them back together again? How would their new relationship be described?

3. What attracts Jack and Candice to each other? How much does Candice's sterility have to do with the collapse of the relationship? Candice initiates the lesbian relationship she has with Marlis.

What is the emotional basis of their relationship from both sides?

4. Jack sees the worst part of Marlis when he tries to rescue her from an electrical shock that caused her to lose consciousness while both were roaming a store and she tries to sue him. Why does their relationship continue and on what is it based? When Marlis has Jack tied up in a motel and is torturing him with the techniques of feminine beauty, she is trying to force him to say that he loves her and that he is glad about the baby.

What is she hoping to gain from this?

Why later, after their separation, does she seduce Jack while nursing his son, John?

Is Jack simply sexually attracted to her here?

5. Jack intervenes when one of his employees attempts to force his attentions upon Dot, and their own relationship begins at this point. What does each find desirable about the other? Dot suspects that her prowess as an accountant has something to do with their relationship. Does it? When Dot really loves her imprisoned former husband, Gerry, why does she have a relationship with Jack?

What does the brief encounter with Gerry in the snowbound car tell her?

Since Gerry's legal situation is unlikely to change, and their separations will be longer than their unions, what reconciles Dot to Gerry's absences?

6. Has Jack learned anything from these relationships? Is he any wiser than he was before they began? Why are these women attracted to him?

7. Failed relationships are not fun; they are painful and may take years to get over if at all. Why has Erdrich written about these relationships in the form of a comic romance?

Literary Precedents

Erdrich borrows forms from a number of writers. The comic romance, with its series of problems that are resolved and its marriage or marriages, can be seen in Shakespeare's comedies as well as Henry Fielding and Jane Austen. In Tales of Burning Love the marriages of Jack are among the main problems in the novel; one of his wives, Eleanor, is part of the solution, with a relationship to him like but not equal to a marriage.

William Faulkner's many novels and stories dealing with several centuries of his mythic Yoknapatawpha country serve as a model for what Erdrich has been doing in the series of books of which Tales of Burning Love is a part. Just as Faulkner's Hamlet (1940),The Town (1957), and The Mansion (1959) successively deal with different periods in the development of the Snopes's family, so do Erdrich's novels have their history. Tracks, chronologically the earliest reservation novel, is followed by treatments of the reservation in Love Medicine and The Bingo Palace, while The Beet Queen and Tales of Burning Love historically treat the largely white town of Argus. But where Faulkner sometimes has clear heroes, major characters, and minor characters in most of his works, Erdrich creates a community without a clear hero—no Bayard Sartoris or Thomas Sutpen; instead, she creates a narrative community without a hierarchy of importance. The total effect of any one novel or Erdrich's series as a whole is like Chaucer's collected stories on the way to Canterbury; his pilgrims are a moving community, while Erdrich's characters stay in place.

Related Titles

Tales of Burning Love nearly matches the early 1990s time frame of Erdrich's The Bingo Palace. The same snow storm traps Lipsha in both novels and provides dual directions for the events that follow.

Dot was a comic heroine in The Beet Queen, and she was amusing in Love Medicine. Her role in Tales of Burning Love is similar to that of her earlier appearances, except that she is more a rounded character and less an aggressive force. Lyman Lamartine, the Native American businessman who rescues Jack in this novel, is more slick and tough than he was in The Bingo Palace and is far removed from the sympathetic observer of his brother's decline and suicide in Love Medicine. Sister Leopolda in Tales of Burning Love is greatly transformed by the comic genre in which she appears; she is much changed from the witchlike nun in Love Medicine or Eli Kashpaw's tormented lover, Pauline, in Tracks.

In the five volumes of the series, Erdrich has dramatized about ninety years of reservation and Argus, North Dakota life.

The reservation stories are sometimes emotionally crushing, while the white dominated stories are generally comic.

The treatment of action and character in all of the works is a constantly negotiated area between realism and the occasional mythic fantasies of comic romance.

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