

# The Antelope Wife

by Louise Erdrich

## StoryLines Midwest Discussion Guide No. 12

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### About the author

Louise Erdrich was born in 1954 in Little Falls, Minnesota, and grew up among the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. Both of her parents (a German-American father and a French-Chippewa mother) taught school for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. One of seven children, she was raised in a large extended family, surrounded by storytelling, which she firmly believes was a guiding force in her development as a writer. In the early 1970s, Erdrich began studies at Dartmouth University. She eventually formed a remarkable literary collaboration with Michael Dorris, a Dartmouth faculty member, in which they wrote books jointly. Married in 1981, they were separated at the time of his death in 1997. *Love Medicine* (1984) won the National Book Critics Circle Award, along with several other prizes, and helped to establish Erdrich as a major new voice in American writing. In addition to popular success, Erdrich's work has received widespread scholarly attention.

### Discussion questions

What does the past mean for the present? Is it ever possible to sever oneself from family history, family behaviors, family relationships? How does your own ancestry affect your life?

Toward the end of the novel, Cally Roy is recognized as "one who gets the names." Why do names, and the act of naming, carry such weight in the story? Would you call Erdrich herself a "namer"?

Speaking of Minneapolis, Cally says:

*Gakahbekong. That's the name the old ones call the city, what it means from way back when it started as a trading village. Although driveways and houses, concrete parking garages and business stores cover the city's scape, the same land is hunched underneath. There are times, like now, I get this sense of the temporary. It could all blow off. . . .*

How does this passage correspond to other recurring viewpoints in the book—especially those about time and ownership?

### Additional reading:

Michael Dorris. *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*, 1987.  
Louise Erdrich. *Love Medicine*, 1984.  
*The Beet Queen*, 1986.  
*Tracks*, 1988.  
*The Bingo Palace*, 1994.  
*The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, 2001.  
Jim Harrison. *Dalva*, 1988.  
David Treuer. *Little*, 1995.  
Gerald Robert Vizenor. *Landfill Meditation: Crossblood Stories*, 1991.  
James Welch. *Fools Crow*, 1986.  
Ray A. Young Bear. *Remnants of the First Earth*, 1997.

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Caught up in the frenzied, post-Civil-War slaughter of an Ojibwa village “mistaken for hostile,” cavalryman Scranton Roy bayonets an old woman “who set upon him with no other weapon but a stone picked from the ground.” Moments later he notices a dog with a human baby bound to its back, and hoping to flee his own atrocity, sets out after them, eventually rescuing the child, and, amazingly, suckling it at his own breast.

*The Antelope Wife* (1998), Louise Erdrich’s sixth novel, tracks the intersecting lineages of Scranton Roy and the Ojibwa baby’s mother, Blue Prairie Woman, all the way to present-day Minneapolis. Or—to look at it in reverse—Erdrich’s extended family of contemporary characters is steeped in messages from the deep past of their ancestry.

In *The Antelope Wife*, Erdrich “has returned to what she does best,” writes *New York Times* reviewer Michiko Kakutani, “using multiple viewpoints and strange, surreal tales within tales to conjure up a family’s legacy of love, duty and guilt, and to show us how that family’s fortunes have both shifted—and endured. . . .” At the novel’s heart is Erdrich’s response to the oldest of human enigmas: Is there a grand design behind our experience, or simply random chance or chaos?

We’re led into the modern story by Klaus Shawano, trader and waste-disposal worker, who recounts his desperate attraction to Sweetheart Calico, a woman he first spotted at a powwow in Montana. She’s said to be descended from a girl who lived with antelopes (she is the “Antelope Wife” of the title). Klaus is warned: “Some men follow the antelope and lose their minds.” Like most characters in novels, he shrugs off sage advice. The tale of Klaus and his obsessive love will appear and disappear throughout the book, like a musical motif.

But Cally Roy narrates much of the story, and the death of her twin sister, Deanna, forms its

central event. The twins’ mother, Rozina Roy, is married to Richard Whiteheart Beads, but loves Frank Shawano (“famous Indian bakery chef”). When Rozina tells her husband that Frank has cancer and she intends to live with him until he dies, Richard becomes distraught. Later, drunk, he sets out to asphyxiate himself in the garage. Tragically, he makes a brief return to the house, and eleven-year-old Deanna stows away in the truck, believing she’s going on a ride with her father. When Richard finally abandons his suicide attempt, he leaves the motor running in the closed garage.

Deanna’s mother is overcome with grief. As told by the dog, Almost Soup:

*She swam in grief, she cooked with it, she bagged it up and froze it. She made a stew, burned it out in the backyard, dug a hole and threw it in, sacked it for garbage, put it up on a shelf, brought it to the trees she loved, and set it free out in the leaves. She worshiped it, curled around it like a sweet dog, smoothed the hair of her remaining daughter underneath her hand, and decided to have nothing to do with men.*

Given time, Rozina heals. She eventually goes to law school and marries Frank Shawano, who survives his cancer. But her former husband remains inconsolable.

Erdrich couches her meditation on design vs. chance in the imagery of an Indian myth about twins doing beadwork. “One sews with light and one with dark.” They compete furiously, “each trying to set one more bead into the pattern than her sister, each trying to upset the balance of the world.” Beads and beading turn up all through the story, but for the Roys, the Shawanos, the Whiteheart Beads, and the other modern-day characters, the wisdom of the old stories is a mixed blessing.

“Do we have a choice?” Cally Roy wonders. “Family stories repeat themselves in patterns and waves generation to generation, across bloods and time,” she says. “Once the pattern is set we go on replicating it. Here on the handle the vines and leaves of infidelities. There, a suicidal tendency, a fatal wish. On this side drinking. On the other a repression of guilt that finally explodes.” And what of the possibility that there’s *no* pattern to things?

Deanna and Cally are only one of several sets of twins in *The Antelope Wife*, and the novel is uncommonly full of pairings: fate and free will, tragedy and comedy, love as salvation and love as trouble. Other recurring images also help knit things together: dogs, the power of names, *windigos* (trickster demons, craziness), the act of storytelling itself. And food—the book is full of stews and sweet rolls, deer sausage and Ambrosia, the bounty of a wedding feast, and Frank Shawano’s passionate quest to make the perfect *blitzkuchen*.

For a novel rooted in a child’s death and a father’s unquenchable remorse—and so interwoven with other kinds of suffering, past and present—*The Antelope Wife* is exceptionally funny. Erdrich calls humor “an Indian’s seventh sense.” The constant storytelling in the novel is spiked with sly jokes (even the dog, Almost Soup, gets to tell one about three Indian dogs waiting to be put to sleep). And the account of Rozina’s and Frank’s wedding—for all the tragedy that attends it—is an extended exercise in slapstick. For the characters, this is a humor that springs from self-preservation; it’s also another instance of Erdrich’s mingling of opposites.

Since the appearance of her first novel, the inventive and widely popular *Love Medicine* (1984), Erdrich has been known for her lyrical prose. She has also published books of poems. Critics have accused her of occasional “overwriting,” but *The Antelope Wife* is composed with grace, and abounds with lovely passages. Here, for instance, is Rozina, up all night, visited by Deanna’s spirit:

*The earth tips its farthest shoulder to the sun and the dark goes solid. Cold air seizes in bands along the mopboards. She sits there, waiting for Deanna to tell her what she came for, what she wants, what she can do. Incrementally, the dark motes thin to gray. The air stirs with the cold soupiness of dawn.*

It’s up to Cally to speak the last words of the story. “Everything is all knotted up in a tangle,” she tells us. “Pull one string of this family and the whole web will tremble.” She’s still grappling with the problem of what the past means for the present, and how to cope with the great imponderables:

*Did these occurrences have a paradigm in the settlement of old scores and pains and betrayals that went back in time? Or are we working out the minor details of a strictly random pattern? Who is beading us? . . . All these questions they tug at the brain. We stand on tiptoe, trying to see over the edge, and only catch a glimpse of the next bead on the string, and the woman’s hand moving, one day, the next, and the needle flashing over the horizon.*

Synopsis. *The Antelope Wife* extends the branches of the families who populate Louise Erdrich's earlier novels, and once again, her unsentimental, unsparring writing captures the Native American sense of despair, magic, and humor. Rooted in myth and set in contemporary Minneapolis, this poetic and haunting story spans a century, at the center of which is a mysterious and graceful woman known as the Antelope Wife.