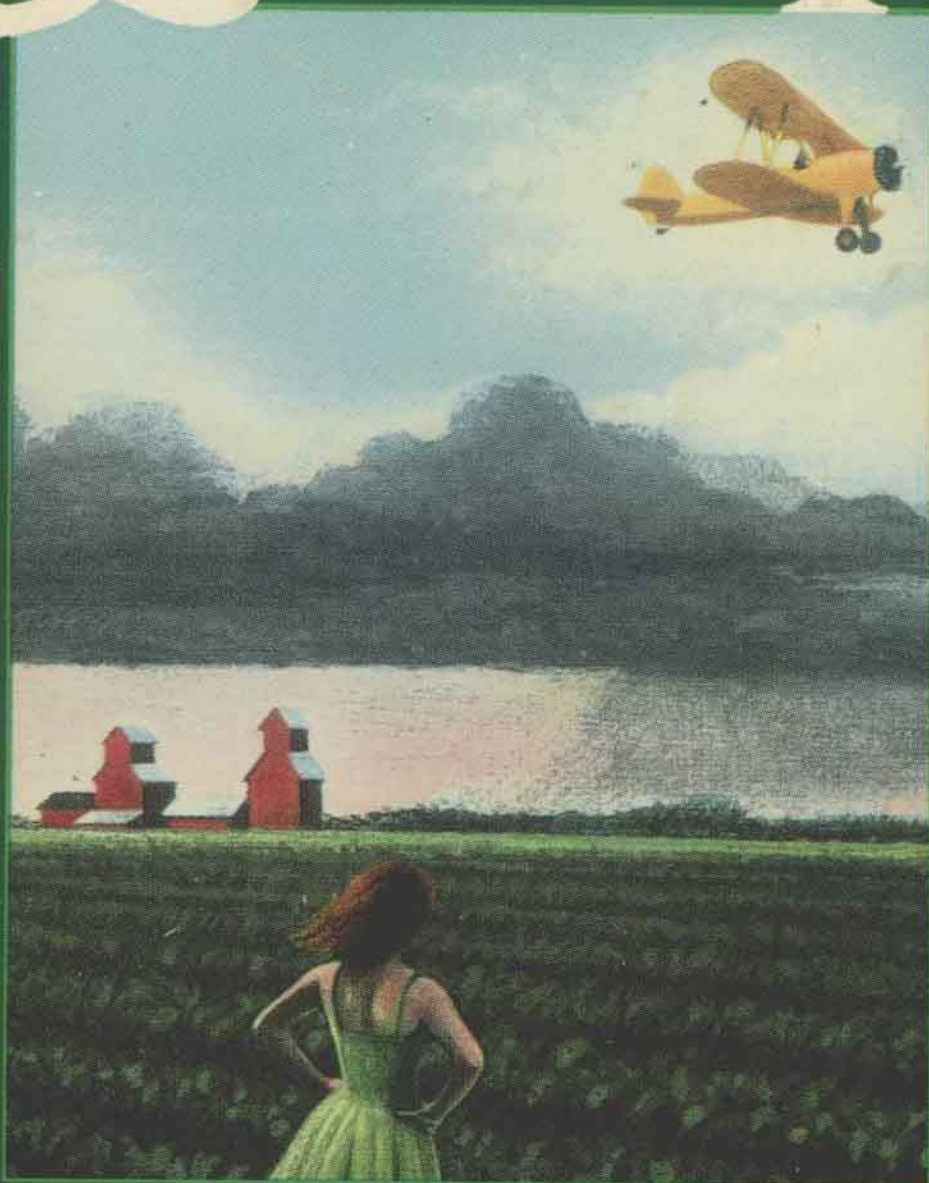


THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER  
"A PERFECT—AND PERFECTLY WONDERFUL—NOVEL."  
—ANNE TYLER

# The BEET QUEEN



# LOUISE ERDRICH

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF  
LOVE MEDICINE

*The*  
*B E E T Q U E E N*

---

*LOUISE*  
*ERDRICH*



**BANTAM BOOKS**

**TORONTO • NEW YORK • LONDON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND**

*This low-priced Bantam Book  
has been completely reset in a type face  
designed for easy reading, and was printed  
from new plates. It contains the complete  
text of the original hard-cover edition.  
NOT ONE WORD HAS BEEN OMITTED.*

### THE BEET QUEEN

*A Bantam Book / published by arrangement with  
Henry Holt and Company, Inc.*

### PRINTING HISTORY

*Henry Holt edition first published September 1986*

*Parts of this book appeared, in slightly altered form, in the following publications: "The Branch" and "Chapter One: 1932," The Paris Review, as "The Beet Queen." "Chapter Two: 1932, Sita Kozka, Mary Adare, Celestine James," New Native America, a book by University of New Mexico Press, as "The Manifestation at Argus." "Chapter Two: 1932, Sita Kozka," Ms. magazine, August 1986. "Chapter Three: 1932, Karl Adare," The American Voice, Fall 1986. Part of "Chapter Seven: 1953," Chicago Magazine as "Knives." "Chapter Six: 1952," Antaeus, as "The Air Seeder." "Chapter Seven: 1953, Celestine James," as "Chez Sita," Minneapolis-St. Paul Magazine, August 1986. "Chapter Eight: 1953," Formations, as "The Little Book." Parts of Chapters Nine and Fifteen, The Georgia Review, as "Mister Argus." Part of Chapter Ten, New England Review, Fall 1986. "Chapter Eleven: 1964," The Atlantic Monthly, as "Destiny." "Chapter Thirteen: 1972, Celestine James," The Kenyon Review, as "Pounding the Dog."*

*The author would like to thank the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation for their support during the years this book was written.*

*Bantam edition / October 1987*

*All rights reserved.*

*Copyright © 1986 by Louise Erdrich.*

*Cover art copyright © 1987 by Bantam Books, Inc.*

*Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 86-4788*

*This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by  
mimeograph or any other means, without permission.*

*For information address: Henry Holt and Company, Inc.,*

*521 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10175*

ISBN 0-553-26807-4

*Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada*

---

*Bantam Books are published by Bantam Books, Inc. Its trademark, consisting of the words "Bantam Books" and the portrayal of a rooster, is Registered in U.S. Patent and Trademark Office and in other countries. Marca Registrada. Bantam Books, Inc., 666 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10103.*

---

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

O 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# THE BEET QUEEN

---

"THE DIALOGUE IS BRILLIANT FROM START TO FINISH. AND MARY, KARL, CELESTINE, SITA AND DOT ARE ALL ORIGINAL AND POWERFUL CHARACTERS WHO, LIKE THEIR RELATIVES IN *LOVE MEDICINE*, LEFT ME EXHILARATED, SOMEWHAT DRAINED, AND VERY GRATEFUL TO THIS IMMENSELY GIFTED NOVELIST FOR *THE BEET QUEEN*."

—*Chicago Sun-Times*

"SHE IS A LUMINOUS WRITER AND HAS PRODUCED A NOVEL RICH IN MOVEMENT, BEAUTY, EVENT. HER PROSE SPINS AND SPARKLES, AND DANCES RIGHT ON THE HEART WHEN IT NEEDS TO."—*Los Angeles Times*

"A WONDERFUL BOOK—ORIGINAL, RICH AND VERY MOVING."—*Vogue*

"WHAT ERDRICH BRINGS TO *THE BEET QUEEN*, AS SHE DID TO *LOVE MEDICINE*, IS A PROSE STYLE OF RINGING CLARITY AND LYRICISM."—*The New Republic*

"*THE BEET QUEEN* IS A SLOWLY GATHERING STORM SHAKING LOOSE EVERY BELIEF YOU HOLD ABOUT THE LIMITS OF YOUR ABILITY TO LOVE."—*The Milwaukee Journal*

"*THE BEET QUEEN* CULMINATES IN AN ENDING OF INCREDIBLE SWEEP, SCOPE AND COMIC POWER... AN ORIGINAL BOOK, A VERY AMERICAN BOOK."

—*Kansas City Star*

"A SEARING NOVEL."—*The Dallas Times Herald*

"A STUNNING AND AMBITIOUS WORK."

—*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*



“LOUISE ERDRICH’S IMAGINATION IS A MAGIC SHOW.”

—*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

“ERDRICH IS AMONG OUR MOST POWERFUL WRITERS . . . [SHE] CAN WEAVE A WEB AS FINE AS ANY SPIDER’S, BUT HERS IS MADE OF STEEL.”—Martin Cruz Smith, *San Francisco Chronicle*

A BRILLIANT, HEART-THRILLING BOOK. SCENE AFTER SCENE SHINES WITH THE WISDOM AND STUNNING TALENT THAT MARK LOUISE ERDRICH AS ONE OF OUR VERY BEST WRITERS. HERS IS A VISION RICHLY PEOPLE, DEEPLY FELT BUT STILL DELICIOUSLY COMIC.”

—Josephine Humphreys, author of *Dreams of Sleep*

“LOUISE ERDRICH IS A SORCERESS WITH LANGUAGE, AND HER WAY OF TELLING A STORY REVEALS THE MAGIC OF EXISTENCE.”—Gail Godwin

“ENGROSSING AND BREATHTAKING . . . ERDRICH’S BRILLIANCE IS SUCH THAT WE BELIEVE DEEPLY IN HER PEOPLE, ARE LAZZLED BY HER WORDS.”—*Library Journal*

“VIVID AND COMPELLING . . . A TRULY LOVELY BOOK—WORTHY SUCCESSOR TO *LOVE MEDICINE*.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“A MAJOR NOVELIST . . . THIS IS A NOVEL UNABASHEDLY RICH . . . MS. ERDRICH HAS THE STORYTELLER’S GIFT: SHE CAN SPELLBIND YOU.”—*Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*

“TO READ *THE BEET QUEEN* IS TO COME UPON A KIND OF MAGIC THAT ONE KNOWS HAS ALWAYS BEEN IN THE WORLD BUT THAT HAS REMAINED OBSCURED UNTIL LOUISE ERDRICH REVEALS IT TO US WITH HER REMARKABLE VISION.”—Robb Forman Dew, author of *Dale Loves Sophie to Death*

*Other books by Louise Erdrich*

---

*JACKLIGHT (POEMS)*

*LOVE MEDICINE*

*To Michael*

---

*Complice in every  
word, essential  
as air.*

## Acknowledgments

---

*Grateful acknowledgments are made, first, to my father Ralph Erdrich, and also to my grandmother Mary Erdrich Korll, to our editor and publisher Richard Seaver, to our Aunt Virginia Burkhardt for her generous enthusiasm and advice, to Charles Rembar, and to Barbara Bonner, friend and passionate reader.*



*The*  
*B E E T Q U E E N*

---

### About the Author

---

*Louise Erdrich grew up in North Dakota, is of German-American and Chippewa descent, and is a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. Her first book was Jacklight, a volume of poetry. Her second, Love Medicine, was the winner of both the Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction and the Los Angeles Times award for best novel of 1985. Foreign editions of Love Medicine have been published by major houses in England, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Holland, Spain, France, and Denmark.*

*She lives in New Hampshire with her husband/collaborator Michael Dorris, and their children Abel, Sava, Madeline, Persia, and Pallas.*

## *Contents*

---

The Branch 1

### *PART ONE*

---

CHAPTER ONE 1932

MARY ADARE 5

KARL'S NIGHT 20

CHAPTER TWO 1932

SITA KOZKA 25

MARY ADARE 32

CELESTINE JAMES 37

RESCUE 40

CHAPTER THREE 1932

KARL ADARE 43

AERIAL VIEW OF ARGUS 50

### *PART TWO*

---

CHAPTER FOUR 1941

MARY ADARE 65

THE ORPHANS' PICNIC 72

*CHAPTER FIVE 1950**SITA KOZKA 75**SITA'S WEDDING 87**CHAPTER SIX 1952**KARL ADARE 91**WALLACE'S NIGHT 97**CHAPTER SEVEN 1953**CELESTINE JAMES 100**MARY'S NIGHT 126**CHAPTER EIGHT 1953**SITA KOZKA 130**RUSSELL'S NIGHT 139**CHAPTER NINE 1954**WALLACE PFEF 143**CELESTINE'S NIGHT 157*

---

*PART THREE*

---

*CHAPTER TEN 1960**MARY ADARE 161**SITA'S NIGHT 183*

CHAPTER ELEVEN    1964

CELESTINE JAMES    191

THE BIRDORAMA    206

CHAPTER TWELVE    1964

WALLACE PFEF    209

THE OX MOTEL    228

---

PART FOUR

---

CHAPTER THIRTEEN    1972

CELESTINE JAMES    237

SITA TAPPE    253

MARY ADARE    261

MOST-DECORATED HERO    268

CHAPTER FOURTEEN    1971

WALLACE PFEF    271

THE PASSENGER    280

CHAPTER FIFTEEN    1972

KARL ADARE    284

THE GRANDSTAND    291

CHAPTER SIXTEEN    1972

DOT    295

## THE BRANCH

Long before they planted beets in Argus and built the highways, there was a railroad. Along the track, which crossed the Dakota-Minnesota border and stretched on to Minneapolis, everything that made the town arrived. All that diminished the town departed by that route, too. On a cold spring morning in 1932 the train brought both an addition and a subtraction. They came by freight. By the time they reached Argus their lips were violet and their feet were so numb that, when they jumped out of the boxcar, they stumbled and scraped their palms and knees through the cinders.

The boy was a tall fourteen, hunched with his sudden growth and very pale. His mouth was sweetly curved, his skin fine and girlish. His sister was only eleven years old, but already she was so short and ordinary that it was obvious she would be this way all her life. Her name was square and practical as the rest of her. Mary. She brushed her coat off and stood in the watery wind. Between the buildings there was only more bare horizon for her to see, and from time to time men crossing it. Wheat was the big crop then, and the topsoil was so newly tilled that it hadn't all blown off yet, the way it had in Kansas. In fact, times were generally much better in eastern North Dakota than in most places, which is why Karl and Mary Adare had come there on the train. Their mother's sister, Fritzie, lived on the eastern edge of town. She ran a butcher shop with her husband.

The two Adares put their hands up their sleeves and started walking. Once they began to move they felt warmer, although they'd been traveling all night and the chill had reached deep. They walked east, down the dirt and planking of the broad main street, reading the signs on each false-front clapboard store they passed, even reading the gilt letters in the window of the brick bank. None of these places was a butcher shop. Abruptly, the stores stopped, and a string of houses, weathered



gray or peeling gray paint, with dogs tied to their porch railings, began.

Small trees were planted in the yards of a few of these houses, and one tree, weak, a scratch of light against the gray of everything else, tossed in a film of blossoms. Mary trudged solidly forward, hardly glancing at it, but Karl stopped. The tree drew him with its delicate perfume. His cheeks went pink, he stretched his arms out like a sleepwalker, and in one long transfixed motion he floated to the tree and buried his face in the white petals.

Turning to look for Karl, Mary was frightened by how far back he had fallen and how still he was, his face pressed in the flowers. She shouted, but he did not seem to hear her and only stood, strange and stock-still among the branches. He did not move even when the dog in the yard lunged against its rope and bawled. He did not notice when the door to the house opened and a woman scrambled out. She shouted at Karl too, but he paid her no mind and so she untied her dog. Large and anxious, it flew forward in great bounds. And then, either to protect himself or to seize the blooms, Karl reached out and tore a branch from the tree.

It was such a large branch, from such a small tree, that blight would attack the scar where it was pulled off. The leaves would fall away later on that summer and the sap would sink into the roots. The next spring, when Mary passed it on some errand, she saw that it bore no blossoms and remembered how, when the dog jumped for Karl, he struck out with the branch and the petals dropped around the dog's fierce outstretched body in a sudden snow. Then he yelled, "Run!" and Mary ran east, toward Aunt Fritzie. But Karl ran back to the boxcar and the train.

# *PART ONE*

---

