

Love and Death: A Woman's Role In The Master Butchers Singing Club

Perhaps, given 9-11 and "Operation Iraqi Freedom," and the continued suicide bombing in the Middle East, it is not too to say that we live in a time of violence. For some the answer is to fight violence with violence. For others, the roots of violence like deeper, and might even be found next door, in one's own family or community relationships. If that is true, the better response might be to first deal with the evil in our midst, along with the pain it involves, in which we might be better prepared to face it, perhaps contain it, around the globe, rather than blaming others and immediately going on the attack. In The Master Butchers Singing Club, published just prior to the Iraqi War, Louise Erdrich attempts to examine the roots and meaning of violence in both narrow and wide perspectives, as though the two were indigenously related. Says critic Karen Weeks of the novel:

. . . Murderers could be a best friend or fellow tenor, not just a trained soldier. Everyone has the capacity both to inflict and to survive great pain. As in her other works, Erdrich's characters reveal surprising depths when faced with suffering and death. (18)

But there is another level to the enigma that underpins the urge to kill, one that is related to gender. Could it be the violence is mainly a masculine thing? Without oversimplifying the dilemma, Erdrich in a rather complex narrative attempts to examine the role of sex in relation to physical violence and death, even as they occur in global war, and effect these killings have on individuals as well as whole human family.

Master Butcher includes several kinds of death, and near death, along with the

suffering it causes, in the small, rural town of Argus, North Dakota, in the first half of the 20th century. It's a time and place we know from The Beet Queen. But more than this, the book also includes killing in war, namely World War I and World War II, where examples of violent death bracket the individual stories in the novel and put them into larger perspective. The main plot begins with a man, Fidelis Waldvogel, a feared German sniper during World War I, who after watching his friend Johannes die in his arms returns home to marry Johannes's pregnant widow, Eva, as a kind of compensation for the man's death. A butcher (another kind of killer) by trade, he then becomes enamored by a piece of American bread—which may have Eucharistic connotations—and emigrates to America, to Argus, selling sausages to pay for the trip. Though some see such details as the best part of the book (Allen), the novel has deeper more profound implications rooted in the positive effects of violence. Zobenica notes that Erdrich uses a variety of devices of death

. . . to reveal the unexpected and quite often wonderful legacies of each life, any life, no matter how insignificant, accidental, or misspent that life may have appeared.

In America Fidelis establishes a singing club, by which he unites the community, including a rival butcher, Pete Koska. Music, of course, can be a major way we deal with emotional trauma (Ode), and in this sense the club seems to reverse Fidelis's role as a soldier, that is, from causing death to generating unity, even love, individually and communally. Whether he totally succeeds or not becomes the task of the novel. But what is most interesting is that, in spite of his attempt to do so, the focus of Master Butcher (and the more pervasive job of promoting togetherness) falls mainly to a woman, namely,

Delphine Watzka, the apparent daughter of Roy Watzka, the town drunk. It's also true, however, that she does it at a price.

One crucial death—or intended death—in Argus is the attempted murder of Delphine herself as a new born babe, retrieved by a dumpster diver called Step-and-a-Half, a Lakota woman, displaced by the massacre at Wounded Knee, who gives the infant to Roy Watzka to be raised as his daughter. In a novel full of individual secrets (Miller), we do not know and of this until the end, and Delphine never knows it, though, ironically, she comes to see her motherless situation as the source of her peculiar sensitivity (54)—a phenomenon one would hardly expect of a motherless child. Though the object of violence, she grows up to be something quite the opposite, a harbinger of human compassion, and this is the essential irony of the book—returning love for attempted violence. We've seen hints of this kind of action in other Erdrich novels, like The Antelope Wife, where a German prisoner in World War II is surprised to find that his is greeted with compassion by the enemy rather than the expected revenge, and later this soldier returns the favor by baking a magnificent sweet cake (AW 132-39). Though most would call this approach foolish, Curwen says that in this type of approach—including the rescue of Delphine and parallel actions throughout the the book—^{he's consequent approach to life.} — reveals the metaphysical side of the author, indeed “a daring played out against the highest of stakes--that of life and death—at the heart of which lies a deep spiritual hunger.”

Originally, we meet Delphine as the lover of an Ojibwe vaudeville actor, Cyprian Lazaree (another Indian^s, along with Step-and-a-Half), and whom Goldberg calls “a sleek enigma,” for he too has a compassionate side. At one time he saves one of Fidelis's boys,

Markus, from the collapse of a cave the boy had dug. ~~Some critics see this cave as~~
~~indicative of a malavolence rooted in the earth, indeed life itself (~~~~the earth~~~~).~~ Cyprian's
 action consequently keeps the Waldvogel family in tact. Delphine serves Cyprian as a
 stabilizer in his balancing act, supporting with her stomach muscles the pole on which he
 performs. For Martin this role is symbolic of her balancing so many factors in the
 novel, realistically the whole Waldvogel family (as we shall see), but the very notions of
 art and life, and by extension even death and love. Early on, however, she learns by
 accident that Cyprian, for all his good qualities, is bisexual, a fact that undercuts her ties
 to one whom she continues to love, while not being in love. Ironically, the revelation
 opens possibilities for new relationships, most of which involve her ability (unselfishly)
 to serve others.

Perhaps the most telling death in the novel is that of Eva, Fidelis's wife, after a
 long bout with cancer. Delphine has now returned home to Argus with Cyprian to care
 for her alcoholic father, continually cleaning up his "piss and vomit" (48), though in truth
 he is not her father. At the same time Delphine agrees to care for Eva in her long bout
 with cancer, and experience that expands her role as servant. In the process the two
 become intimate friends, a phenomenon that also brings her closer to Fidelis. Though
 some Allen insists these two characters are "pure nonentities," Kline is more accurate in
 saying that Fidelis's and Delphine's mutual love for Eva "brings them together in a bond
 that transcends romantic love, and she adds that "in that triangular relationship the tone
 and clarity of each character's timbre never falters." What is curious, however, is that
 Delphine's character grows as Fidelis's strength fades. Though Fidelis's journey to
 America might be viewed as a kind of odyssey, the real Homeric hero is Delphine, who

as Rose insightfully indicates, has to undergo all kinds of trials, including returning to set her father on his feet, being detained by a god-like love (Cyprian) with whom there is no hope of success, facing (as we shall see) a terrible underworld, a series of deaths in her father's cellar, and being charmed by a Circe her childhood friend, Clarisse, the local undertaker, whose job it is to turn human beings into something else.

After Eva's death, Delphine marries Fidelis, taking over the loving task of mothering Fidelis's four boys, whose varied lives in turn cause her undo pain. One of them, Markus, nearly dies from the collapse of cave he has built, and she nurses him back to health. Cyprian rescues the child. Some critics see this incident with the cave as indicative of a malavolence rooted in the earth, indeed life itself (?), and it has lasting and profound effects on the whole family. But then Delphine must outwit the Cyclopean Tante, Fidelis's sister, who had mercilessly stolen Eva's morphine during her sickness, and would "eat" Fidelis's youngest children, Eric and Emil, by taking them to Germany when money gives out in the 1930's. Through all this Delphine is again the stabilizer. Not all critics, however, view Delphine as a convincing character. Allen sees her as an "idealized abstraction," and Nahai claims she has no "heart or mind that motivates her person" (Nahai). Still, her involvement in so many reflective contexts where she makes key decisions ^{cannot but note her an impression} make her a character to be reckoned with. ^{can see her as} Indeed, as one critic observes, the "moral center" of the novel (Kirkus Reviews). Prose points out that there is no melodrama here, and Passaro even adds that Delphine is "comic, shrewd, and erotic . . . with old fashioned assurance and a light, witty touch."

But most central to the novel is a group of deaths. Here the family of Porky Chavers, a member of the singing club, perishes after being for some unknown reason

locked in Roy's cellar, creating a mystery that not only drives much of the action of the novel, but affects Delphine in new and torturous ways. The realization of this ~~set~~ of deaths leaves Delphine mentally crushed and the community aghast, but Erdrich, says Prose, is able to make such grotesque events "plausible and convincing." Before we know that Roy is the one responsible for the deaths, leaving the family marooned in his cellar on one of his drunken binges, other events add to Delphine's grief. She ~~then~~ loses her best friend, Clarisse, the local undertaker, who Sheriff Hock threatens to frame for the murder if she refuses his sexual advances. Together the two women have acted out scenes from Shakespeare (74), scenes involving emotions not too far removed from the mysterious deaths in Argus. In this way Erdrich is able to combine art (vaudeville) and drama (Shakespeare), along with music (the singing club) to give depth to the novel, and especially to Delphine's character as she moves from Cyprian through Clarisse to Fidelis. ~~Clarisse kills Hock rather than succumb and must leave town.~~ ^{off Hock from the local undertaker} Cyprian (unaware of the murder (another secret) agrees to drive her to Minneapolis, whereupon she loses ~~her~~ Cyprian as a confidant and so devotes her energy to comforting Fidelis, who persuades her to marry him after Eva's death. Though their marriage originally appears to be a deep and satisfying relationship, things fall apart toward the end. With the departure of the twins, and the coming of World War II, which involves his offspring again in violent death, Fidelis loses his spirit. Allen, who is not enamored with any of the characters in the novel, says that Fidelis is competent, but "emotionally limited," with a "hidden vulnerability." Nahai points out that originally Fidelis's passion for Delphine was intense, able to "make the geraniums yawn" ()—an example of the hyperbole some find disturbing—but fades in the end into a distant relationship inconsistent with his

original passion. Meadows adds that “Fidelis’s glorious voice feels like an afterthought added to justify the title,” but that is not the same as saying his part fades, which is consistent with the overall development. As Delphine’s voice rises. Indeed, by the end most of the members of the singing club, including Cyprian, Porky, and Roy, are gone. Only Delphine remains as the ^{solidifier} stabilizing factor in the community. Wilkinson ^{insightfully} notes that she is “endlessly resourceful” and “one of Erdrich’s finest characters.”

But then there is the business of war, which begins and ends the novel.

Here again Delphine again plays a major part. Though some see the final section of the novel as merely added on ([?]), it is crucial to the wholeness of the story. Now Erich, fighting for the Germans as did his father, is killed in action, and Emil is taken prisoner. Meanwhile Markus joins the U.S. military against his parents wishes and Franz, the oldest boy, after serving as a U.S. pilot, is maimed forever by a falling cable ^{save his role as fight pilot in the air} after his ~~return from the front.~~ This accident changes forever his romantic relationship to his long time girlfriend Marazine, who Delphine loves, much as she does the boys, and in fact has helped promote their marriage. What she doesn’t know is that she is really Marazine’s sister, though her actions suggest those of sisterhood. When Fidelis and Delphine visit Germany after the war, the experience virtually kills Fidelis. Erich elects to remain loyal to Germany, and the music abroad that Fidelis hears—really the inspiration for his own singing club in America —has lost its meaning and only serves to increase his sadness. Indeed the notes of Lili Marlain are not those that brought a whole community together. Now He returns to American a broken man, and soon he dies. Only Delphine survives all the tragedy.

There is another note that adds to the drama. Before his death Roy shared with Delphine the story of his wife, Minnie, who is a survivor of Wounded Knee where so many Sioux were massacred by the the white soldiers. It is another example of killing in a military setting. The event only puts in a larger historical setting the ravages of war—where one culture (led by men) hates another and where the killing involved has a terrible effect on innocent people. Again it is a woman, and one living on the lowest level economically, who reverses the process, for we discover in the end that Minnie is the dumpster diver, ^{or} ^{creator} the one who rescues Delphine from an outhouse, and gives her to Roy Watzak to raise as his daughter. Here an Indian woman serves as the caring, life-giving person, and Delphine, the balancer through Cyrpian (the other Native American), continues to generate life through her special sensitivity. We may once again live in a time of war again, and again the male motive is to return violence with violence. It may take a person like Delphine to counter the horrendous effects of killing in any sense, and to continue the role of music started by her husband, that is, to unite desperate elements through love, or to use a Native term so basic to Erdrich, *love medicine*.

It is interesting that critics of Master Butchers see the novel in diametrically ^{opposite} ^{part} opposed views. Deborah Rybak of the Minneapolis Star Tribune notes that two New York Times critics, Brook Allen and Michiko Kakutani see the book differently. Allen says the novel lacks “one credible character” and that it is “too unfocused, too wide-ranging to sustain much force.” Michiko Kakutani, on the other hand, claims the book is “emotionally resonant” with an instinctive sympathy for her characters” as Erdrich connects “public and private concerns.” Other say she overwrites, that the book has too many plots, that ultimately it goes nowhere. What most of these people miss, I contend,

Is the overall structure—several stories bracket by two World Wars. The progress

In between wars to which each of the stories pertain, is the development from Fidelis (whose character fades) to Delphine (who comes to dominate the overall theme of love vs. violence, including death). The interwoven texture is then underpinned by a background of music, art, and drama, as well as a sense of secrets, giving the novel a mysterious texture that holds the reader throughout.

But most important is the character of Delphine, who some see as connected to Erdrich's own grandmother () and the theme of love (love medicine) vs. violence, including attempted or near death, accidental death, and even deliberate death, or murder. It is almost a cliché to say the love is important to most people. Religious people of all faiths proclaim it perennially. By contrast—and few critics mention this—Delphine (and this is one place she agrees with her father), God is dead. Roy, basically a compassionate individual, says that God has left a huge hole in creation that can be filled only with “spirits.” (292). His alcoholism turns this kind of statement into tragic humor, but later he will tell Delphine about his wife, Minnie, a survivor of Wounded Knee, giving his view of violence and death a greater depth. When Fidelis's wife Eva is dying, and cancer is tearing away at her body, she greets the pious women at her bedside who hardly understand her pain with what amounts to a curse: “Spit in your eye” (122). Delphine questions the “false assurance” that “prayers worked” (43) when contemplating the many kinds of violence she witnesses. In her own case, she sees “a woman-shaped hole at the center of the universe through which her mother, then Eva, and now Clarisse had walked” (267). As a child Delphine thought the goodness of God was simply “A Lie” (54). And when children like Markus are sent to war while the press is

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