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ones the spirits "trusted . . . to remember it right" (pp. 26-7). This splendid brown and red book from West End Press is a steal at \$4.95. *The Halfbreed Chronicles* tells it right.

Susan Scarberry-García  
The Colorado College

**The Beet Queen.** By Louise Erdrich. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1986. 338 pp. \$16.95 Cloth.

This is Erdrich's second novel. Her first, *Love Medicine*, was published in 1984 and it was an instant success which gained a great deal of popularity and critical acclaim, including the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction. Unfortunately, this success ultimately may weigh against *The Beet Queen* because Erdrich has chosen to move away from the tribal focus that was the center of her first novel—the "Chippewa" point of view that garnered the attention of so many critics. Besides, there is the tradition of condemning, through comparison, the second novels of those who produce greatness with their first.

Despite these obstacles, *The Beet Queen* is a fine book that exhibits the same power for storytelling and command of the language that figured so prominently in her earlier novel and her first book, a collection of poetry entitled *Jacklight* (1984). Like *Love Medicine*, *Beet Queen* is set in the northern plains where Erdrich was raised, and it is a demanding land she depicts, a land of conflicting extremes where the bitter cold of the winters is barely balanced by the hot, drought dust of the summers. And this land, with all its demands, is carefully, lovingly, poetically conveyed through Erdrich's narrative as it evolves into the common denominator for greatly dissimilar characters and their points of view. Like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, her North Dakota gains added dimension and provides new insights into human nature with each new character she creates, with each novel she writes.

Where *Love Medicine* explores Erdrich's tribal heritage by expressing her perception of the contemporary Chippewa of this place, *Beet Queen* is inspired by her European heritage, for it traces forty years in the lives and travails of recent immigrants

to "Argus," North Dakota. In fact, the prologue to the novel could be a play on words that conveys the subject matter of the book. "The Branch" describes the arrival of Mary and Karl Adare in 1932, and although its title alludes to a specific limb Karl breaks from a tree, it also suggests a family tree with perhaps a European branch. And the families one finds in the novel are equally fragmented; like Karl's limb, their members are separated from any satisfying, permanent sense of kinship, or roots.

Karl and Mary are the illegitimate children of a German-American farmer whose untimely death literally casts them and their mother, Adelaide, adrift in a hostile world. Like so many others who were caught in the collapse of the Great Depression, they are dispossessed and forced to live as best they can, if they can. Despondent, Adelaide deserts her children, and they turn to their only relatives, an uncle and aunt in Argus. *Beet Queen* charts the years that follow their arrival, from 1932 to 1972, but it is not their story alone, as the structure of the novel clearly indicates.

There are four parts to the book, which in itself is suggestive, and there are sixteen chapters, each of which follows the same format. The major section of each is comprised of at least one long, first-person narrative dedicated to one of the six main characters: a story told by the person who has lived it, and for whom the section is titled. Each chapter concludes with a brief, third-person narrative that at first seems unrelated to the "main" narrative of the chapter. But, of course, all the stories are related, and the power of Erdrich's novel can be recognized in our ability and willingness to make the connections between the characters and their stories. In *Love Medicine* she created a community of voices that told the history of the Kashpaws and Lamartines, and she has accomplished a very similar feat in *Beet Queen*.

In a way, the novel is an extremely focused view of American history; its narrators carefully note the changes in the northern plains and rural Argus as land and town are transformed through the efforts of individuals often motivated by personal ambition, or even worse, by some seemingly inexplicable combination of forces that sweep people before them. Wallace Pfef is a good example. At a convention in Minneapolis he sees an exhibit on the sugar beet, but he also meets Karl Adare, with whom he has his first homosexual experience. On his drive home, he parks, alone, in a lovers' lane near Argus and as the night sounds and smells

envelop him, he drifts from the thoughts of Argus to images of Karl, so when the lights from a police car snap on behind him, he is taken by surprise. He must avoid confrontation and the hint of scandal, so as his mind searches for an explanation for his being there, his hand "groped along the front seat and grabbed a pile of pamphlets he'd taken back from the convention. He pressed them to his chest and sprang from the car" (page 109). He tells Officer Lovchik he has stopped here to think, but think of what? Pressed, he thrusts the pamphlets on sugar beets at the officer and, thus, through quirk of character, time and place, life is never the same in Argus or the prairie that surrounds it, for the sugar beet has arrived. It should be noted that Wallace's encounter with Lovchik takes place in a section entitled "Wallace's Night," and that each of the major characters has a similarly titled section. One must wonder what symbolic significance their "nights" may have, and the changes that come with them.

Throughout the narrative characters appear and reappear in a sometimes vexing fabric that has, like life, loose ends. Mary and Karl's younger brother, kidnapped as a baby, crosses their paths again and again. There is also Adelaide's necklace—hocked and given up for lost for years, but recovered by her niece, Sita—and a crucial letter misplaced and not mailed until decades after it was written. In short, Erdrich blends into her story a number of literary devices, from the "foundling" to the lost letter, but she does not make traditional use of them. Instead, they provide a frustrating and provocative counterpoint to the main characters themselves. Romantic convention collides with the realism of people wandering alone, looking for connections and fulfillment. The readers' expectations, their hoped-for resolutions, play out against characters who develop into beings we feel sympathy for, but would not like to know.

But on the periphery of the narrative, one also finds the Chippewa: Eli, Russell, and Celestine (James) Kashpaw, who play, respectively more elaborate and lengthy roles. Erdrich also introduces Fleur Pillager who, like Old Man Pillager in *Love Medicine*, possesses a great deal of knowledge and power—a forceful healer. At one point, Erdrich takes her readers on a drive to the reservation where the material and social values of Argus and the "main" characters stand in sharp contrast; the sound and fury of interaction in the towns and cities wither in the silence of Eli's home. These characters provide an interesting counterpoint to

those at the center of the action. And throughout the forty-year story, there are other forces working that are never confronted directly, only alluded to, seen out of the corners of our eyes as the sugar beet takes over, the drought prevails and the miniskirt and drugs come to Argus.

The last chapter belongs to Dot, the child of the sixties, and of mixed ancestry. She is one of the beet queens in the book, and like others of her generation, she is a quester, a searcher. She is also the product of misunderstanding, egocentric motivations, and history: the generation of the future. The nature of that future—as well as the events of the years between 1972 and 1986—may be the subject of *Beet Queen*, and despite Dot's heritage, her future is not wholly a bleak prospect. As in Erdrich's earlier novel, there is love medicine in her second. It is not a medicine easily achieved, and it is never without risk and disappointment. Such is life.

And such is the nature of the novel. Its writing was risky, for it departs from the tribal focus found in Erdrich's first novel. This departure may bias some readers' reactions, but when one considers Erdrich's obvious artistic talent as demonstrated in *The Beet Queen* and examines the subject matter of this second in the context of her first (and, if rumor is accurate, a marvelous third novel due for publication soon) one must recognize the scope and power of her vision, and her ability to express it. *The Beet Queen* is a drama well worth consideration.

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**The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions.** By Paula Gunn Allen. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986. xi & 311 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 Cloth.

Paula Gunn Allen is already well known as a Native American poet, but in this important and pathbreaking collection of her essays she also makes significant contributions to the study of contemporary American Indians, literary criticism, and Women's Studies. Her desire is to make spirituality a central theme of American Indian Studies, and through that theme to illustrate