



October 2, 1988
Section 7 ©The New York Times

"Memories of Amnesia" by Lawrence Shainberg, reviewed by Diane Johnson. Page 7.

In the Heart of the Heartland



Louise Erdrich.

JAMES HAMILTON

TRACKS

By Louise Erdrich.
226 pp. New York:
Henry Holt & Company. \$18.95

By Jean Strouse

EVER since her first novel, "Love Medicine," appeared in 1984, Louise Erdrich has been populating a specific place — the Chippewa Indian reservation and its North Dakota-Minnesota surround — with characters as strong and original, as funny and tough, as furious and vivid as any who have recently graced the American literary landscape. Her sure sense of the way people think and talk keeps it hard to remember she is making them all up, and her lithe, athletic prose makes wildly improbable events seem as natural as the weather.

Ms. Erdrich, herself half Chippewa (her father was German-American), has said that her favorite authors are Faulkner, Eudora Welty and Toni Morrison. That admiration shows as she gives imaginative life to a world many of us would not otherwise see. It is a world of haunting texture and detail — of old tribal land claims and beliefs in conflict with government treaties, timber interests and the Christian church; of Vietnam veterans, prison es-

Continued on page 41

Jean Strouse, a critic and essayist and the author of "Alice James: A Biography," is working on a life of J. Pierpont Morgan.



Charlie Smith.

THE NEW YORK TIMES/APRIL 11/88

SHINE HAWK

By Charlie Smith.
367 pp. New York:
Paris Review Editions/
British American Publishing.
\$17.95.

By Lorrie Moore

ADREAD of forebears has caused some Southern writing to stake out territory obliquely, irreverently, to one side of tradition. One cannot, it seems, write about half-cracked relatives, or the small town whose local color includes the quieter forms of matricide and fratricide, without hearing the ticking of Faulkner's heart, or the grandfather clock of Wolfe chiming into the night. A writer must feel as if he were doodling in church.

But there are still writers who go into that church and by dint of prayer or genius or some stubborn curse emerge with works of appalling brilliance. Charlie Smith, author of the novel "Canaan," appears to be one of these. His second novel, "Shine Hawk," is a rich, fatiguing novel about "rich fatigue," and in it he returns to the Georgia of his birth and upbringing, a country whose romantic notions and painterly hues lie "sprawled beyond the windshield"

Continued on page 42

Lorrie Moore, the author of "Anagrams," a novel, and "The Forgotten Helper," for children, teaches creative writing at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Mexican Letter: Fighting Words, Poisoned Pens

By Larry Rohter

IN LATIN AMERICA, politics and literature not only converge, they often collide, and at the moment, the din from the nastiest clash in recent years is echoing throughout the region. What began in June with a long polemic in a Mexican literary magazine has grown into a transcontinental argument about the relationship between history and the novel and between revolution and democracy —

Larry Rohter is chief of the Mexico City bureau of The New York Times.

all of it enlivened by harsh personal insults, accusations of back-stabbing campaigns aimed at winning the Nobel Prize in Literature and even the spectacle of Nicaragua's top cop passing literary judgment on some of Latin America's leading intellectuals.

At the center of the storm are Carlos Fuentes, the esteemed Mexican novelist whose best known books include "The Death of Artemio Cruz" and "Terra Nostra," and Enrique Krauze, a Mexican historian and biographer who is managing editor of *Vuelta*, a monthly intellectual journal read throughout Latin America. Arguing that "the key to Fuentes is not in

Mexico but in Hollywood," Mr. Krauze attacked the novelist in a 13-page analysis of his works as someone whose "elementary, resentful, rhetorical nationalism" and "hasty and imprecise judgments" of history and politics prevent him from "any intrinsic understanding of Latin American phenomena" and disqualify him from acting in a favorite role as "the self-designated spokesman" for Mexico and Latin America to readers in the United States.

"In the epigraph of one of his books, Fuentes once said that 'objectivity is at the same time impossible

Continued on page 31

'Tracks'

Continued from page 1

cape artists, drifters, construction workers, butchers, healers and would-be saints; of trust and isolation, survival, love, unwelcome change and drastic loss. Ms. Erdrich's novels, regional in the best sense, are "about" the experience of Native Americans the way Toni Morrison's are about black people, William Faulkner's and Eudora Welty's about the South, Philip Roth's and Bernard Malamud's about Jews: the specificity implies nothing provincial or small.

MS. ERDRICH'S characters tell their stories in the first-person singular, and out of these shifting points of view a larger tale takes shape and organically grows. As the saga goes on over many generations and from one novel to the next, chrono-logic matters less than the integrity of the voices: an ancillary character in "Love Medicine" comes up at the center of "The Beet Queen" (1986) — and now "Tracks" gives the cycle another deft turn, going way back to the parents and grandparents of people in the first two books. (There is a fourth to come.) You could probably read them in any order, but I'd recommend following the sequence of publication since it enhances the pleasure of what you find out. One of the finest characters in "Love Medicine" is a woman named Lulu Lamartine who has eight sons by eight different men; partway through "Tracks" I heard myself think, "Yikes! That's Lulu's mother?"

The novel opens in the bitter winter of 1912: the Chippewa, their ranks already diminished by smallpox, fevers, forced migration and exile, now get nearly wiped out by a raging TB epidemic. "Our tribe unraveled like a coarse rope, frayed at either end as the old and new among us were taken," says a foxy old survivor named Nanapush:

Nanapush is one of two storytellers who narrate and play key roles in what follows. He knows the "old" ways: "I guided the last buffalo hunt. I saw the last bear shot. I trapped the last beaver with a pelt of more than two years' growth. I spoke aloud the words of the government treaty, and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake." He knows his people's stories, cures and songs; and he knows not to mention the names of the dead, out of fear that "they would hear us and never rest, come back out of pity for the loneliness we felt. They would sit in the snow outside the door, waiting until from longing we joined them."

Also telling the story, alternating chapters with Nanapush, is a young woman named Pauline from a family of "mixed bloods, skimmers in the clan for which the name was lost." Pale, discontented, refusing to



follow Chippewa customs, she pesters her father for an outhouse "with a door that swung open and shut" and wants to get off the reservation: "I saw that to hang back was to perish. . . . I was made for better."

What Pauline and Nanapush recount, from these starkly different perspectives, is the mysterious story of a young woman named Fleur Pillager, the last of a clan "who knew the secret ways to cure or kill." Nanapush finds Fleur, that devastating winter of 1912, alone in a cabin deep in the woods, raving and starving, "wild as a filthy wolf," with her family's bodies lying in "stinking silence" on the floor. He takes her home and nurses her back to life. Cured, Fleur returns to live in the Pillager cabin on Lake Matchimanito, where she hunts, fishes, dresses like a man, studies old tribal medicines and excites plenty of curious talk. She "messed with evil," reports Pauline, and any man who messed with Fleur ended up dead. But her shaman powers cannot stop white depredations: government agents press for fees on her land, and timber wagons rattle out of her woods stacked high with oak logs.

In the summer of 1913, Fleur takes off for Argus,

Unlocking the Tale

"I always felt this was a great burden, this novel," Louise Erdrich said. "Tracks" is her third book about a group of characters who live on and around a North Dakota Indian reservation. But the novel was based on a 400-page manuscript that had been sitting around for 10 years, she said in a telephone interview from Cornish, N. H., where she lives with her husband and collaborator, Michael Dorris, and their five children.

"At the end of 'The Beet Queen,' when I didn't know where to go next, Michael suggested that I get the manuscript out. I didn't think of it as having a relationship to my other books," she said. As she and her husband began their usual collaboration, however — discussing the draft and fleshing out protagonist, plot and theme — they were drawn again to the constellation of characters introduced in "Love Medicine," her first novel.

Even then she got stuck, said Ms. Erdrich, who, like her husband, is of European and Indian descent. The tale was unlocked only when she finally found the right way to tell it. "Michael started talking about the Athapaskin Indians who

live around Tyonek, Alaska, where he once hunted. In their language, there is no word for 'I' — only 'we.' " So she used two narrators in "Tracks," spinning out the story from their contrasting points of view. "I didn't set out consciously to alternate their chapters," she said. "But it turned out that Nanapush was the balance to Pauline's increasing madness."

Now, with the third tale of the Morrisseys, Lazarres, Kashpaws and Puyats behind her, the 34-year-old Ms. Erdrich — who is expecting a baby in February — is collaborating with her husband on his nonfiction book about fetal alcohol syndrome in American Indian children. She and Mr. Dorris are also working on the first novel that will bear both their names as authors, "The Crown of Columbus," about a Native American woman who discovers Christopher Columbus.

But she has plans, too, to write a fourth novel in the North Dakota cycle. "I can't stand not knowing what's happening," she said. "I don't want to sound sentimental or mystical, but there's an ongoing conversation with these fictional people. Events suggest themselves. You have no choice." DEBORAH STEAD

N.D. (the setting of "The Beet Queen"), and gets a job cutting meat for a butcher. Pauline, already there sweeping floors and being ignored ("I hardly rinsed through the white girls' thoughts" and "was invisible" to men), attaches herself to Fleur, feeling the older girl's sexual power with the avid hunger of the outcast. Yet it wasn't, notes Pauline, just that Fleur was a Chippewa, or "that she was good-looking or even that she was alone that made [the white men's] brains hum. It was how she played cards." How Fleur plays cards brings her a lot of money — and a nightmare of rape and revenge, described with hallucinatory intensity by Pauline. And when Fleur walks back onto the reservation that fall with something — money? a baby? — under her dress, people hum with gossip.

Speculation grows louder when a young loner named Eli Kashpaw follows a gutshot deer out to Fleur's cabin and falls in love. Eli "couldn't rub two words together and get a spark," says Nanapush, who, having taught the boy all about animals, trees and wind, now instructs him in love. In short order Eli moves in with Fleur, local spies report on their intimate pleasures and Fleur is definitively pregnant — by Eli? the Argus men? the copper-scaled creature that lives in the lake and is part of the evil Fleur messed with?

Ms. Erdrich's women are for the most part fiercer, nastier, more powerful, effective and inexorable than her men — and for sheer demented malice Pauline takes the prize. The mission-Catholic girl, "stark and bony" as a starved cow, hangs around watching Fleur and Eli with predatory prurience: "Some days I saw the signs, the small dents of her teeth on his arm, the scorched moons of bruises on his throat. Or I sensed touching, an odor, a warmth like sun streaming down on skin for an afternoon. In the morning, before they washed . . . they smelled like animals, wild and heady, and sometimes in the dusk their fingers left tracks like snails, glistening and wet."

Enraged with envy and desire, Pauline turns desolation into a weird kind of power — part pagan hex, part devious Christian mysticism. Ms. Erdrich has said that she had a "Gothic-Catholic" childhood, and Pauline's lust to be chosen by God is nothing, if not Gothic. She sees Christ's love as a "hook sunk deep in our flesh," and indulges in wanton mortifications — to Nanapush's great amusement. When she shows up with her shoes on the wrong feet to remind her of Christ's imprisonment, Nanapush announces: "God is turning this woman into a duck." When he learns that she wears potato-sacking underwear, he wonders if she enjoys the scratch, "like the beard of a Frenchman." But there's nothing amusing about the damage Pauline does as her hysterical martyrdom ratchets up — as she meets mercy with destruction, dispenses pain instead of love, and step by self-deluding step helps force the Chippewa off their ancestral land.

That other tragic story — of incomprehensible taxes and allotment fees, government treachery, church collusion, liquor, the dollar, the loss of the "old" life and powers and finally the loss of the land — runs all through the tales Pauline and Nanapush tell. And the saddest part isn't in the machinations of some far-off bureaucracy: it's in the way these changes bring on the betrayal of one Indian by another, in shocking abdications of love.

WITH all three books Ms. Erdrich artfully sifts the miraculous through the mundane: people see God(s) where they want to, in a wounded hand, a smashed pane of ice, an owl, a bear, a convent kitchen stove. Her stories reflect on various kinds of power — spiritual, sexual, emotional, political — and on the nature of stories themselves. If knowledge is a kind of power, stories preserve and pass it along, tracking, shaping, trying to make sense of what happens. A woman gets pregnant; men die; couples fall in love, fight, come back together — or don't; a quiet forest with its own creatures and rhythms is taken away from the people who have always lived there. How did these things come about? What do they add up to? "There is a story to all," Nanapush tells Fleur's daughter, "never visible while it is happening."

Continued on next page

'Tracks'

Continued from preceding page

Only after, when an old man sits dreaming and talking in his chair, the design springs clear. There was so much we saw and never knew."

Some storytellers, generous and supple, pay a special kind of attention to what they see. Like Nanapush, they are imaginative reporters, able to think their way

into the experience of animals, construction workers, new mothers, grandparents, adolescent boys — able to follow the ineffable tracks of what goes on. Others, like Pauline, are at such odd, rigid angles to the rest of the world that they distort and try to control the things they see, leaving their own tracks all over the story as they remake what's happened into something they can bear.

This novel feels a bit more didactic and wrought than Louise Erdrich's previous books: good and evil play out their parts somewhat too schematically, and the politics that previously came alive through the

characters themselves sometimes seem imposed with a heavier hand. However, the story of the Chippewas' losing struggle to preserve their land and culture is inherently more political than the stories set later in the 20th century, more about radical innocence up against ravenous greed. It has a mythic force, and Ms. Erdrich is, as always, the generous kind of storyteller, passing along not only everything her characters know, but the story of the stories as well. Giving life and shape and sense to what's happened, she lets the designs spring clear. □

'Shine Hawk'

Continued from page 1

like the body of a harlequin."

Shine Hawk is a prairie area of south Georgia, and Mr. Smith sets up as his narrative framework the carting of a corpse to its proper grave, a burial procession that echoes the one in Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying." The corpse in this case is Jake Jackson, a man who, as a youth, was put in jail for "assassinating the first-prize winner at the county Fat Cattle Show." His brother Frank has come to fetch the dissipated corpse from the trailer park in which Jake has died, and has enlisted the aid of Hazel, Frank's wife, as well as their oldest friend, Billy Crew, who is Hazel's erstwhile lover and "Shine Hawk" 's lyric-laden narrator. The three of them load the body onto Frank's pickup truck and drive, "like lunatic lemmings," to the Jackson homestead in the aptly named town of Skye. The unburied brother in the back of the truck serves to unbury and uproot much of the ailing, secret life of these three benighted characters, and the erotic, desultory trip south along the muddy Congress River becomes a tale of the heart's pandemonium. "There's no way back," chants Billy. "The only way is through." And through the detours and asides and run-ins with townspeople, we hear Billy's unbearably lovely voice attempting to piece together his own mad life and the lives of his friends, with whom he is in love.

"Loneliness comes when we have reached a place we believe we can't go on from," he says. His own existence, not unlike his pal Frank's, has been one of restlessness winding down not to peace but to exhaustion. Momentum has been a kind of all. A fledgling painter, years before he had married quickly and vengefully and fled Georgia for New York "and the whole great blossoming life that would leech from us everything we cared about."

"There I had found my milieu, which was one of light-heavyweight art, a vigorous, self-disciplined wife, money in the bank, touting friends, my last mural reproduced in full color in the art magazines. My painting was in full flower, called by a *Journal of Art* critic — a friend of mine — 'A dexterous and muscular welding of folk story and the abstract, penetrated by a wistful and persistent longing that lingers in the mind like the call of a bird...' I had mastered my trick; the french kiss of narrative and lyric, story roosting in a storm of color so that the faces, the bent and hurt backs that peeked from an aviary of abstraction, of momentum, seemed always just prevented from uttering some



fierce and implacable truth that would snap the viewer's heart in two." This is Billy's cynical self-description, and so largely characterization. But it is also the novel talking rather explicitly about itself. Certainly the theme of evanescent epiphany, of elusive truth, of longing and questing dissolved to joke or darkness or both, pervades Billy's story. In New York he befriends an art critic who says, "We have to realize it, then go on living." Billy tells him that everyone has a secret that makes it possible for him to go on and asks the critic what his is. "Matricide," says the critic. "I believe in matricide. . . . I promise myself I'll kill my mother. It relaxes me."

In New York Billy's wife, Marilyn, complains of his "venal capriciousness." "Divesting myself of worldly ties," Billy says, "I startled and disheartened everyone who knew me. 'What is this craziness?' Marilyn would cry, but baffled myself, I didn't know what to say. An architect, she wanted lines and angles she could work along, but I gave her none. Her rages turned eventually to sullenness and scorn, and finally to the techniques of escape: she took a lover, a cowboy artist from Montana, who, tall in pointed boots, knew what he wanted."

His marriage ended, Billy abandons his painting, begins drinking, and attends the ballet every night. "Those vigorous outlandish lives that leapt across the scrubbed floors of concert halls and studios and bare church basements seemed wild with portent and meaning." To have a life wild with meaning is what Billy desires, and that desire sends him back south — first to the Gulf town of St. Luke's, and finally to Hazel and Frank in Shine Hawk.

Oddly, it is in the more infrequent New York passages that Mr. Smith's fine writing seems somehow its best. Here, he cannot prettily catalogue the "quince bushes and ligustrum hedges"; he does not feel compelled to re-create a land sycamore by sycamore, and

his sentences, stripped of flora and fauna, rely on man not nature, and are somehow stronger thereby. The sentences depicting the South can, on occasion, seem prolix and self-generating, in syntactical overbloom. Moreover, the narrator's travel back and forth in time is unassisted even by the use of the past perfect, usually employed to signal such movement. Billy Crew lurches in and out of reverie and reminiscence in both the South and the North, as if the Georgia and New York of this novel were simply adjacent regions of his brain, neighboring states a kid might speed across the borders of for drink.

One reads "Shine Hawk" the way one reads the poetry of the self-destroyed. It is queasy and awesome, and the characters, "chattering fierce lies at the edge of language," have lives that both repel and impress. Hazel, indefinite as the eye color that is her name, is part siren, part earth mother, a former rock-and-roll singer whose large frame and strong bones have haunted Billy through years of other women. "All I had ever wanted was a life in which I might look up to see her coming into the room," he says, though as with so much that is romantically sought and declared in the novel it seems a half-truth. Hazel is ultimately the vessel in which Frank and Billy may join their feelings. She is their epicenter, and with the drift toward the absent middle that is the novel's movement, she becomes, finally, irrelevant to the love between them.

AND so it is Frank who is Billy's true obsession, a Frank who vainly bequeaths his best friends to each other, so that he may be left to reclaim and eulogize his dead brother and get on with his own sentimental dying. His earliest memory of Jake, he says, is "of him putting the little stuffed birds Mama hung on the Christmas tree into his hair." "When I was little he would tell me a story about how, all over the country, there were solitary men living in back rooms behind feed stores and in the attics above the bank who were writing the history of the world. . . . In the new history, he said, dogs could fly and sad women came downstairs in the morning to find that someone had filled the house with flowers."

But sweetness and hope are made into sordid, demented things in the world of these characters. When Hazel, Frank and Billy make love, it is near Jake's corpse, the flesh already turning to gravy, the first maggot crawling from the nose. The lye Frank sprinkles over Jake, to cut the stench, is no mere wordplay: it scorches the body to a peeled plum. One feels demise everywhere, in the bones of the book, like rain. The fate that awaits them in the Shine Hawk swamps seems as morally inevitable as it seems mysterious and narratively unhinged.

But one reads "Shine Hawk" for the prose, for its heart-trust of memory and sensual association, and for the narrator's tenacious birding for truth though it flap indifferently, indecipherably away. "Perhaps life was simply a form of recognition, not a placement or a purchase, not anything fabricated and striven for," Billy says. "Perhaps there was nothing more required of us here beyond a patience that allowed us still to be on the scene when the day arrived when we could see. Perhaps old God and his angels had nothing more in mind than creating one of those pictures like I found when I was a child in *Boy's Weekly*, where they asked the question, What is wrong with this picture? But perhaps God asked, *What is right?*"

"Shine Hawk" exhibits the great work of art's refusal to console, as well as its paradoxical hankering for consolation. One feels everywhere in the novel a life and imagination laid down fully and at risk, as if it were the major literary effort — as perhaps it is — of someone terribly gifted and cursed. □

On the Edge of the Pine Barrens

The author's bio that accompanies review copies of "Shine Hawk" isn't the usual terse paragraph of dates and degrees. "Charlie Smith was born June 27, 1947, in a cotton and tobacco town at the edge of the South Georgia pine barrens," it begins. "In 1961 he went to Exeter where he discovered Jackson Pollock, lacrosse and gin. . . ." He studied philosophy at Duke University, spent three years in Micronesia as a Peace Corps volunteer, worked as a journalist in Atlanta, "got divorced," "quit drinking gin" and moved to a farmhouse in the Blue Ridge Mountains where, "for a time, his personal life became difficult. He continued writing and gradually life got better." No one who's read the novel would have any trouble figuring out the author of this rhapsodic document — even if it wasn't entitled "Charlie Smith on Charlie Smith: An Autobiographical Sketch."

"I just sat down and wrote it," Mr. Smith confessed, talking in the tiny, cluttered living room — the only room — of his West Village

apartment. Not that he doesn't revise. "Shine Hawk" was a long haul. "I guess I wrote 25 versions of the first part," he said. "Good work comes out of a place I have no control over."

An exacting critic of his own work, Mr. Smith pushed through to the end of several novels that he finally put in a drawer — "I wasn't satisfied with them" — and one, entitled "Canaan," that he allowed to see the light of day. Published in 1985, it's out of print; Mr. Smith himself only possesses a single copy. "My mother-in-law sent it to me this week," he said. "They seem to just disappear on me."

He writes "all the time," both fiction and poetry. "It's what I do." How does he know when he's getting somewhere?

"There's a sense of capacity and energy, the feeling you have when whatever it is you're doing suddenly feels natural, like loving a woman or going to the beach," Mr. Smith answered in a hesitant drawl. "That's when you know that you got it right." JAMES ATLAS