

# Tracks: the life and times of the nanapush essay

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Tracks: The Life and Times of the Nanapush“ We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall, (Erdrich, 1989, p. 1).” Louise Erdrich starts out her novel Tracks by setting the scene for a ten year long descent of the Nanapush line of ancestors and the tribe of North Dakota regional Indians, in which they belong. The novel is told in the voice of the elder Nanapush and a “ half-breed” named Pauline. The two weave a story from two different perspectives. They share the story of illness, famine, loss of land and spirit. This book offers an in-depth look at what life is like for modern day Indians. It incorporates social and cultural issues that have surfaced between Indians and their white neighbors, as well as the inherent conflicts that Native Americans endure living in a world that does not understand their traditions.

The book is set in the early part of the twentieth century from approximately 1912 until 1924 when many Native American’s lost their land to white who forced people off their ancestral land by imposing taxes that the people can not pay. Erdrich uses the voices of Nanapush, Pauline and other characters including Lulu and her wild mother Fleur Pillager to describe what it means to Native Americans to lose their land, a mixture of desperation and a loss of identity. In addition, the people in the novel also loose their loved ones, which for the Native American’s is a link to their heritage, another form of identity. Erdrich weaves the past and present into her novel to fully explain the current day situation. For example, Nanapush draws the reader into the story about Lulu’s mother and how she came to make the choices that she made in her life. Nanapush had formed a close relationship with Fleur when a “ new sickness” ransacked the entire tribe and killed members of both

Nanapush and Fleur's families. Nanapush rescues her from near death and the two form a father and daughter relationship through mutual grieving.

They bury their dead together and mourn their loved ones. Nanapush adopts Fleur in many ways since his own wife and child has died. Fleur later goes on to marry Eli Kapshaw, a man whose family convince Fleur to work together to come up with the funds to pay off both families land. However, the Kapshaw's, specifically Fleur's mother-in-law pays for the Kapshaw land only. Fleur defies the white man's law and lives on her families land while loggers ravage the landscape.

She has a daughter, whom Nanapush takes in and names Lulu after his own dead daughter. Much of the dialog between Nanapush and his granddaughter Lulu is his rendition of these accounts. Nanapush wants Lulu to understand her estranged mother. In addition, Nanapush is afraid that Lulu will make the same mistakes as her mother, namely get involved with a man that she may later regret. Pauline's character is both weak and strong. There is a dual identity to Pauline. Since she is not a full blooded Indian she does not feel like she completely belongs with members of the tribe but she does not belong with the white Aunt in which she lives either.

Pauline is drawn to the feisty confidence that is within Fleur but she is slightly afraid of her as well. The two worked together and they have had many common experiences. Throughout the book there are instances in which Fleur incites Pauline's suspicions as well as her fear. It is as if Pauline believes, as do a number of the other members of the tribe, that Fleur has magical powers.

Pauline tries to use her knowledge of Fleur's peculiarities by giving the details of all of the things she knows of Fleur to the town meddler, Margaret, who later becomes Nanapush's lover." One afternoon, in a thaw of midwinter, Pauline took the lure. I happened to be visiting the table too, stealing food like a weasel, listening with open ears. Naturally, once Pauline's mouth started it couldn't stop. It was if she took the first drink, and from then on the drinks took her.

She was a quick and brittle thing, all nerves, and she stuffed bread down and babbled through the crumbs, (Erdrich, 1989, p. 52)." But there is more to Pauline, than her desire to belong and her feelings toward Fleur. Pauline's mother and sister have died and she lives with her Aunt Dutch, but she hates her. She leads another woman Bernadette Morrissey to believe she is being abused at her aunt's home and they invite her to live on the Morrissey farm. While there Pauline begins going to church as well as attending to the towns dead.

While living there Pauline acquires a strange obsession with Fleur and Eli and she puts a spell on Eli and Bernadette's daughter Sophie, who has a profound love for candy, to make them have a sexual relationship. " There were the three of us, Sophie and Eli and me, on the farm. Bernadette had taken the youngest into town and Clarence and Napoleon were helping a cousin repair some harvest tool while Eli pinched a last loaf of hay. I made Sophie assist with the baking. Mounds of dough, sweetened and sour, filled our dishpans. Into the first, the one for Eli, I kneaded the last of the potion. We let the bread rise under towels, punched them down.

Sophie gazed out the door, scratched her flank and grudgingly used the comb I put into her hand, (Erdrich, 1989, p. 82).” However, this does little to sway Eli and Fleur’s relationship in the long run. The incident with Sophie does create tension between Eli and Fleur and their relationship but because the tension is not lasting Pauline focuses her attention elsewhere soon after the event. “ The first time after Sophie, he stayed away from Fleur only long enough to know he couldn’t.

He returned and she let him back in the house. But she refused to speak, refused to touch, refused to cook a morsel for him. Being with her and not with her was almost worse than being alone, (Erdrich, 1989, p. 105).” Pauline then gets pregnant by one of Bernadette’s sons.

Throughout her pregnancy Pauline tries to starve herself in order to terminate the pregnancy. Bernadette consols her throughout this period of time and then forces her to deliver the baby. Bernadette ends up raising the baby, named Maria, after Pauline is convinced the child is possessed. Pauline then goes and lives at a convent and becomes a nun. Pauline is the exact opposite of Fleur. Fleur has an identity, whereas Pauline does not know who she is. Fleur’s character is wrapped in mystery, yet no one takes Pauline seriously.

Throughout the novel Pauline floats in and out of the tribal life. She finds herself badly burned and seeks solace at her convent. When she was pregnant she was cared for by Bernadette but when the baby is born she flees to the convent. She also floats back and forth between right and wrong, White and Indian, and Fleur and her convent. In addition, Pauline has

no land of her own. Therefore, she has no real place or roots. All of these elements come together as many of the characters set out for revenge. Fleur runs back to her land, despite the logging activities, and puts spells on the loggers.

She sends her daughter, Lulu away to school to ensure her safety. This is where the story really begins, because Nanapush is explaining these events to Lulu after he claims her from the school facility. The destruction of the trees as well as the spirits that they contain drives Fleur mad. Pauline seeks revenge too. She travels to Fleur's home and on the brink of insanity she believes she is wrestling with the devil, however, it is Lazarus, the father of her abandoned child. She kills him. Bernadette then seeks revenge for her son's death.

All of this fighting and destruction is part of what Nanapush wants Lulu to avoid. In conclusion, Erdrich gives an in-depth look at the complicated inner workings of the Native American's in North Dakota. Her characters are complex yet predictable. They are characters with real human traits.

Throughout Tracks, Nanapush gives us a sympathetic account of Fleur, her life and motivations. In addition, we get a broad understanding of the tribe's history and the outside influences that have shaped their destinies.

Nanapush's status as an elder lends a air of authority to his narrative. Like a gentle and wise grandfather his story makes us want to like Fleur, despite her decisions. Pauline, on the other hand tells her own tale. She is overcome with contradiction and displacement. And in the end Pauline becomes eerily unstable.

Her lack of identity, land, heritage and place make her a weak and destructive character. Fleur has everything that Pauline lacks but is also driven to destruction by the loss of her land and the devastation of the forest which for Fleur held much power. It is interesting to note that throughout the widespread disease that killed off much of the tribe Fleur was not nearly as destitute as she was when her land was stolen. However, despite Fleur's destructiveness we still understand that within Fleur there is purpose and strength.

In the end, Fleur has left home and Nanapush has claimed Lulu. Pauline is lost in her convent struggling with good and evil. He, the elder, is now the father of a new generation.

Reference Erdrich, L. (1989). Tracks.

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